

“I’m a little bit like a small-town preacher, these people are my congregation”: Conducting
Professional Journalism in Rural Alberta

Honours Thesis

By Monica Lockett

Bachelor of Arts—Sociology

with Great Distinction

Submitted to the Open ULeth Scholarship (OPUS) Repository

July 2022

Table of Contents

DEDICATION.....	4
ABSTRACT	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
<i>MY STATUS AS AN INSIDER.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>DOING JOURNALISM IN CANADA.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY</i>	<i>9</i>
THEORY: OBJECTIVITY, DRAMATURGY, SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM, AND JOURNALISM ...	11
<i>OBJECTIVITY AND ITS LIMITS.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST AND DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE</i>	<i>13</i>
LITERATURE REVIEW	16
<i>CANADA'S LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>RURAL LIFESTYLES</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL JOURNALIST</i>	<i>22</i>
METHODOLOGY.....	29
<i>METHODS.....</i>	<i>33</i>
FINDINGS	36
<i>DEMOGRAPHICS.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC AND PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS AS OF 2021.</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>KEY THEMES.....</i>	<i>40</i>
SERVICE TO COMMUNITY AND TO JOURNALISM	41
<i>OBJECTIVITY AND SERVICE TO JOURNALISM.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING WITH SOURCES AND AUDIENCES</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Sources</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Audiences.....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Blurred Boundaries</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>COMMUNITY PRESENCE AND ROLE STRAIN</i>	<i>49</i>
BEING A JOURNALIST: THE JOURNALISM INDUSTRY AND ITS CHANGES.....	55
<i>ON BEING A JOURNALIST.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Job and Operational Duties</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Perspectives on the State of Journalism.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>CHALLENGES TO DOING RURAL JOURNALISM</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>COVID-19.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Balancing Work and Life.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Advertising.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM.....</i>	<i>64</i>
DISCUSSION	66
<i>OBJECTIVITY</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>DRAMATURGY AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM.....</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Building Trust and Empathy.....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>The Merging of the Personal and the Professional.....</i>	<i>72</i>

<i>Role Strain and Social Media</i>	73
<i>Gender and Impression Management</i>	75
CONCLUSION	76
<i>KEY FINDINGS</i>	76
<i>CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE</i>	79
<i>LIMITATIONS</i>	80
<i>FUTURE RESEARCH</i>	83
<i>FINAL THOUGHTS</i>	84
REFERENCES	85
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE	92

Dedication

My thesis would not be possible without the help of my supervisors, friends, and family. First, I want to give an endless amount of gratitude and thanks to Dr. Athena Elafros and Dr. Muriel Mellow. Their support, in all forms, has been instrumental for my project, and my success can be significantly attributed to their time and dedication spent working with me to make this thesis project a reality.

Next, I would like to thank my friends and family who listened to my ideas for this project with great intent and provided helpful feedback when I asked for it. Their enthusiasm for my work helped keep me going during challenging times.

I want to thank Joe for being my most supportive person before, during, and after this project. Thank you for being you. Thank you to Tess and Alfie for being the best emotional support pets out there.

Lastly, I want to thank Stan, Carol, Sandra, Hannah, Lexi, Terri, Simon, Frank, and Rob. Thank you for inviting me into your lives to discuss something we are all so passionate about: journalism. This project would not be possible without your insights, experiences, and wisdom.

I want to dedicate this thesis to my grandma, Jean Anna Lockett. She was so proud of her grandchildren for getting an education and she would have been especially proud of this. I miss you and love you.

Abstract

In rural settings, professional work is adapted to fit the needs of the community (Mellow, 2005). I question what, if any, professional adaptations are made by journalists who work in rural communities. The production of journalistic work is highly contextual, and it is important to understand how working in rural areas impacts the development of a professional identity in journalists. I approach this study through a symbolic interactionist lens, utilizing semi-structured interviews with journalists working in a designated rural community in Alberta. Between July-August 2021, nine journalists were interviewed. My findings show deep, ingrained attachments that journalists have to their communities. These participants take the notion of objectivity and mold it to their own unique surroundings and relationships, highlighting the evident subjectivity of objective reporting. These findings are compared with the state of local media in Canada with a discussion on the changing nature of journalistic work.

Introduction

“Journalism is a fragmented, complex, open-ended institution” (Waisbord, 2018).

My Status as an Insider

In another life, I was a journalist working in a rural community. I got my start in the industry at a radio station in High Prairie—a town in northern Alberta of less than 2,300, known for its forestry and agricultural industries. The station I worked in had three employees, including myself as the news reporter and anchor. For a young journalist who had only known what it was like to live in the mid-sized city of Lethbridge, Alberta, the adjustment came as a shock. Living hours away from family, friends, and a decent coffee shop, I struggled to integrate myself into the community. Everyone already had their own close ties with other families in the community and I was the outsider, one of many young working professionals to come in through the revolving door of staff at the radio station. My time in the community was marked by feelings of isolation and loneliness, but it was also a place where I was able to hone my professional skills and engage in-depth with typical journalist practices, such as chasing news leads, interviewing dignitaries, and being generally well-known in the community. The feeling of being a social outsider, while also holding valuable insider status due to my job was an interesting experience, one that elevated my curiosity about identity building and role construction practices in journalists that work in rural communities.

After High Prairie, I moved to Westlock, Alberta, to take up the same position in a slightly bigger station. Westlock is still considered rural, but it was substantially bigger and much closer to a major city centre than High Prairie. The same struggles I felt in High Prairie were magnified in Westlock, something I attribute to my lack of connection with the town, which is a microcosm of extreme conservatism in an already significantly conservative area. When I was laid off from

my job in late 2016, I was ready to go home and pursue other opportunities. That led me to the University of Lethbridge, where I eventually found my calling in sociology. Since deciding to pursue this degree I knew that I wanted to do an honours thesis, focused on rural journalism practices, to find out whether my experiences were unique or whether other journalists in my position felt the same way I did. Though I did not anticipate having to do this study in a global pandemic, I am happy I was still able to complete it. This study marks the start of something I want to continue in future work and studies, so it really should be considered the first part of a larger project on rural journalism practices. I hope you enjoy this as much as I did.

Doing Journalism in Canada

The field of journalism is becoming increasingly fraught, as challenges new and old require practitioners of journalism¹ to adapt to changes in their organization, in their practice, and in their professional relationships with audiences. In Canada, changes related to job loss, revenue loss, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changes to ownership structures have impacted nearly every working journalist (Gill, 2016). As publications continue to shutter their doors, journalists continue to be laid off, and companies trim their bottom lines, these changes have made massive and permanent marks on Canada's media landscape (Gill, 2016). My research aims to discover how these changes have impacted the journalists that have felt them the hardest—those working in rural, community organizations.

There were roughly 12,050 journalists in Canada in 2016, the most recent year that data was available. It is difficult to guess how many of these work in rural communities, but it would likely be a sizeable number, as there are over 1,000 community newspapers in Canada compared

¹ Terms to describe these practitioners in this study include 'journalist', 'reporter', 'anchor', 'writer', 'media worker' and 'editor'. These are used interchangeably as they all encompass similar duties and responsibilities.

to about 90 daily papers (Skelton, 2018; Lindgren et al., 2019). When we learn that companies such as Postmedia experienced 13% lower revenue for its 2021 fiscal year compared to 2020, we do not think of the impact this information has on the journalists working in small, weekly papers for the company (Postmedia, 2021). How are they affected during periods of intense and tumultuous change? Often, we do not consider the impact until it has already happened—i.e., the company has decided to close that paper, effectively leaving that journalist without a job. As an important note, though I speak extensively about newspapers, there are also journalists who work at radio stations or television stations, though their numbers in rural communities are significantly smaller and there is a lack of research data on these organizations in rural areas.

Primarily, my aim is to understand how industry changes have impacted the work of journalists working in rural communities, in order to gain a general picture of how this impacts the way(s) in which journalism is performed and executed in these areas. By connecting these changes to the development of a professional identity in rural journalists, I can gain crucial insight into how journalism is being done at the smallest scale of media in Canada. By focusing this study on journalists, I attempt to shed light on an important stakeholder group in Canada's media scene and allow media workers to tell me firsthand about the challenges they have faced while in their role and how they conceive of their professional roles and responsibilities. It is hoped that this work will contribute to an enhanced and in-depth understanding of what it means to be a working journalist in rural communities and provide readers with a sociological perspective on journalism work that is urgently needed in today's academic and media landscapes (Gans, 2018). It is through this study that I also hope to fill a gap in knowledge on rural journalism in Alberta. Previous studies have focused on journalists in urban centres or within the more populous provinces of Ontario and Quebec due to the high concentration of media workers in these areas (see Shapiro et al., 2013),

but there appears to be little to no literature specifically focusing on journalists working in rural Alberta. This study provides a unique insight into the working conditions of rural journalists in Alberta, and also qualitatively explores how roles and responsibilities are decided in the context of professional identity development, suggesting that professional development in rural settings is markedly different than the primarily urban practices discussed in descriptions of professional work.

Research Questions and Methodology

My research questions center around professional identity practices in rural journalists:

RQ1: To what extent does the current state of local news organizations in Canada affect the construction of a journalist's identity?

RQ2: What challenges do journalists in rural Albertan communities face and how do they overcome them?

RQ3: How is the identity of a journalist constructed and maintained in small, rural news markets in Alberta?

Given the qualitative nature of the subject, I utilize in-depth semi-structured interviews to speak at length with these journalists and get a thorough understanding of their roles, their sense of place in their communities, and their views on the journalism industry. This is done through a symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical lens, which allows me to explore how micro-level journalism practices create meaning and significance for media workers. Because I conduct this research with an insider perspective, I engage in reflexive practices and am forthcoming about my own background with the participants of the study to increase the transparency in which I approach this project. The findings are analyzed utilizing grounded theory methods to help better adhere to the voices and perspectives of the journalists. Through these methods, I also aim to provide a unique perspective on the subject, as other significant journalism projects (see: Lindgren et al.,

2019) typically use quantitative methods and data, while my approach is qualitative and more in-depth. The goal with this work is to shed light on professional journalism practices in rural Alberta communities in an attempt to highlight both the importance of the work these journalists engage in and highlight some of the significant challenges that are faced by these practitioners.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks I use in the study, as well as review the literature on local journalism, identity, and professional work in rural areas. Then, I detail my methodology and discuss my findings at length. Lastly, I conclude with an exploration on the limitations of this project and discuss future research opportunities in this area.

Theory: Objectivity, Dramaturgy, Symbolic Interactionism, and Journalism

Journalism describes the act of creating, gathering, and presenting news and other pertinent information to wide or targeted audiences (Dean, 2021). Being a practitioner of journalism entails adhering to a set of informal rules, norms, and values that are expected of people in the profession—most notably the pursuit of truth through independent verification and adherence to accuracy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). These rules are informal due to the complex, fluid, and socially constructed definitions and boundaries of journalists and journalistic work. Journalism is a cultural practice, and its products are deeply embedded with meaning and are highly contextual (Carlson, 2016; Skinner et al., 2001). Carlson (2016) emphasizes that journalism is its own form of knowledge production, bound together by a common ideology and narrative conventions while also positioning journalism as a “set of institutionalized practices embedded within a web of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting discourses that generate social meanings” (pp. 351, 353). Modern scholarship on journalism generally accepts these premises, but there are arguments to push this narrative further, reflecting on how deeply embedded the construction of authority is within uneven power relations, whiteness, and social order (Callison & Young, 2019). The field of journalism is not protected or regulated like the fields of law or medicine; anyone can do journalism or call themselves a journalist without having to prove their knowledge or merit to others. While this makes the pursuit of journalism a relatively accessible one, it further complicates the structures in which journalism (re)produces knowledge and how it operates in society. Given that journalism is contextual and subject to interpretation, it is important to understand the role of journalists in this construction and how news stories are subjectively formed (Carlson, 2016). News writing may be rooted in first-hand accounts of perceived facts, but these “simple things” are an interpretation of reality, where meaning is created by journalists handling raw data (Skinner

et al., 2001, p. 346). Subsequent messages in news media often privilege certain perspectives, beliefs, cultural practices, values, and uphold dominant narratives and reinforce social structures (Henry & Tator, 2015). This study aims to understand how the social locations of journalists contributes to the development of a professional identity and how this subsequently is reflected in their work. An important facet to the study of the cultural practice of journalism is the long-held and widespread belief that journalists in professional settings must be objective and free from bias in their work.

Objectivity and its Limits

“Objectivity” and the pursuit of neutrality in journalism is a well-known and fundamental expectation of writers but has become a hotly contested issue among scholars and practitioners. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) argue that the real meaning of objectivity has more to with the methods of journalism and not the journalists themselves, advocating for a transparent and rigorous news generation process while also recognizing that journalists are not without bias (p. 10). Tuchman (1972) frames objectivity as a “strategic ritual” that journalists engage in to shield themselves from criticism that their work may be biased and cement a professional claim to objectivity (p. 660). Tuchman (1972) theorizes that journalists follow four procedures that allow them to “claim objectivity” in their work: presenting different “conflicting” perspectives, including supporting evidence, the use of quote attribution, and structuring news stories logically (pp. 665-9). However, it is important to emphasize that these practices do not truly make reporters objective, a sentiment the author echoes by noting that while these practices may be an attempt to achieve objectivity, they “cannot be said to provide objectivity” and instead create an apparent “discrepancy” between the ends sought and achieved (p. 676). Facts may “speak for themselves” for some journalists, but for sociologists such as myself (and Tuchman), it does well to remember

that what we consider fact arises out of our own social constructions, processes, and social locations (Tuchman, 1972, p. 667)

The recognition of bias and subjectivity in a journalist's work is important but needs deeper exploration. Racist discourses in news media are a relatively well-understood and researched occurrence (see Cronlund Anderson & Robertson, 2011; Harding, 2005; Henry & Tator, 2015; Johnston, 2019) and are often linked to skewed understandings of objectivity and the problematic structures and practices within journalism industries. Termed a deep "crisis of credibility" by racialized journalists who are subject to doubts about the accuracy of their reporting and interrogated on their professionalism, it is important to emphasize how subjectivity is manipulated in favour of those with power at the expense of those without (Mattar, 2020). The white subjective becomes the "objective neutral" (Mattar, 2020). This assumption is key for arguments on the social construction of news and how the practice of journalism situates itself in certain places, spaces, times, and realities. In colonized territories, such as Canada, the journalism industry is built on a "foundation of white supremacy" and many journalists are seen as unable or unwilling to challenge their biases and consider how their professional actions and practices contribute to this foundation (Brake, 2021).

A Symbolic Interactionist and Dramaturgical Perspective

Skinner et al. (2001) encourages journalists to engage in self-reflexivity and interrogate their perceived impartiality and how the use of narrative structures imbue facts with meaning. Journalism has been characterized as an "intensely reflexive" occupation, one that creates and structures its own norms and professional expectations (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003, p. 560). It is logical then to consider how the role and the identity of the journalist is constructed by news practitioners themselves, and how that identity (re)enforces or challenges dominant structures of

the industry. In research on role and self-conception, Solomon (1970) observes that conceptions of the self in Canadian Army Officers incorporate a set of guidelines for professional behaviour, and officers internalize a structure of values and norms to guide this behaviour. Solomon (1970) likens a role to a performance, where limits and expectations are in place for the behaviour of the individual in certain situations—specifically this encompasses role obligations and expectations, or situational imperatives (p. 298). However, in Solomon's (1970) example, it is important to point out the gendered role performances, particularly for Army Officers, where we see a demonstration of not just a professional role but of a particular type of masculinity. This study aims to apply this lens to journalist's roles and obligations, connecting the notion of the role as a performance to the dramaturgical ideas from Erving Goffman related to impression management and performance, and related scholarship (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1967).

Symbolic interactionism describes how social meaning is created through micro levels of interaction between actors, the subsequent interpretation(s) of these interactions, and how they contribute to shared understandings of social phenomena. Symbolic interactionism bases its analysis on three premises: 1) we act towards things because of the meanings these things have for us; 2) the meaning of these things arises from the social interaction(s) we have with others; and 3) these meanings are mitigated through our own interpretive processes (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Meaning then arises through this process of interaction between people. It is important to note that this process of meaning-making is highly subjective, as Blumer (1969) considers it a social product and the subsequent use of meanings to be an interpretive act. In dramaturgical thought, Goffman (1959) focuses on face-to-face interaction and how actors attempt to manage the impressions they give, and the impressions they give off during interactions, likening this process to a theatrical performance. In this performance are front and back actions, similar to a theatre stage. "Front"

describes interactions done in front of others while “back” describes actions done solely by the actor (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Interactions are structured according to the role that each actor plays and establishing the facts of the situation in face-to-face interactions is key, as impressions given by others are taken as implicit claims and promises (Goffman, 1959, p. 249). When it comes to understanding how the roles of journalists are constructed and negotiated through interactions, Goffman (1959) notes that established roles, which encompass professional roles, typically have established or institutionalized fronts with stereotypical expectations of interaction (p. 27). However, it is important to understand that Goffman (1959) recognizes the limits of this framework, noting that it has been observed in Western societies and should not be considered “culture-free” (p. 244). Given that much of journalism involves face-to-face interaction with sources and newsmakers, utilizing both a dramaturgical and a symbolic interactionist framework to understand how these interactions are managed and interpreted can provide insight into how these interactions shape a journalist’s conception of professional duties and roles. Explicit in this understanding is acknowledging how these interactions are contextual, open to interpretation, and imbued with, at times uneven, power relations.

Literature Review

Canada's Local News Ecosystem

News organizations in Canada are suffering. Increasing media conglomeration, dwindling ad revenue, the rapid transition to digital media (Gill, 2016), and the COVID-19 pandemic have left news media organizations and workers in a precarious socioeconomic spot. Statistics Canada (2021a) estimates that operating revenues of Canadian newspaper publishers declined more than 20% between 2018 and 2020 and print advertising revenue declined by more than 45%, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these downward trends. A recent survey of small Canadian newsrooms found that there are fewer journalists now than there were in 2016 (Lindgren et al., 2019). Lindgren and Corbett (2018) note that between 2008 and 2018, 231 local newspapers shuttered their doors. Local newspapers, which may be published weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, experience healthy readership levels (73% read a paper weekly) and about one quarter of Canadians say their local paper is the only one they read (News Media Canada, 2013). Much of the data on the loss of local news in Canada is focused on newspapers, however, this study also incorporates perspectives from journalists working in other mediums, such as radio. Data from Statistics Canada (2021b) indicates that while there are more radio stations in 2020 than in 2016 (959 compared to 940), the number of employees in radio broadcasting has decreased by nearly 11%, while profits have sharply decreased by nearly 70%. This is what makes research into local news ecosystems and research on the journalists working within these fields so important. The ability of local media to bring communities together, inform the public, and act as a government watchdog is significant. The rapid closure of many local news organizations means a loss of this type of accountability (Casey, 2019). Losses in both industries have been significant, and it is

important to broaden this study to other news mediums to gain a more nuanced understanding of local news systems in Canada and the challenges journalists in these systems face.

First, it is important to determine what constitutes a local news ecosystem. Bowd (2017) argues that “local” is a contested term, in the sense that it has multiple meanings and understandings across many contexts, both rural and urban (p. 64). However, in journalism contexts, Bowd (2017) acknowledges that there may be a shared understanding in what local encapsulates, which is the events, people, and issues occurring in the primary geographical circulation area of a print newspaper (p. 64). Local news ecosystems are said to comprise of media outlets that serve communities that share a geographic jurisdiction and cover information that is relevant to specific communities (PEN America, 2019, p. 7). This definition of local is accepted and utilized in this study. Local journalists are conceptualized as workers of a news media organization that primarily served the community or communities the news product served. This definition can apply to both urban and rural media outlets as it is dependent on the scope of the organization itself but given that this study focuses specifically on rural outlets, any discussion of ‘local news’ is in reference to rural publications. Hanusch (2015) argues that research on journalism outside of metropolitan areas is “still one of the least researched fields of journalism studies”, highlighting a noted lack in data on the challenges and pressures faced by journalists in rural areas (p. 816). Hanusch (2015) notes that journalists in community news organizations in Australia were more involved in local community groups, were more familiar with their readers, and were heavily focused on community building and providing local news to their community (Petty, 1993, qtd in Hanusch, 2015, p. 818). However, the relationships that local reporters have with their community, or their sources may not accurately reflect the community’s diversity—for example, Hanusch (2015) notes that local journalists’ proximity to local politicians and business

members can make for problematic environments, particularly as it relates to the ability of authorities to control messages for the media.

The pressure that local news organizations face is perhaps felt most severely by publications that serve rural communities. Journalists working in rural communities face unique challenges, in both the nature of their day-to-day work and in the larger goal of sustaining their publication and ensuring its continuing existence in a rapidly changing media landscape. Lindgren et al. (2019) argue that local news (specifically newspapers) plays a key role in constructing shared senses of community (p. 7). Hatcher and Haavik (2014) find in their study on Norwegian community journalists that two factors influence the development of news values—whether the journalist has received formal or professional training, and whether they have a connection to their community (p. 160). The authors note that journalists who had some degree of connection or familiarity with their newspaper’s community felt a sense of pride in their work and in their community, “favour[ing] a journalistic role” that reinforced positive aspects of this community (p. 161). My research questions look to understand the extent to which this notion may be true in the context of Canadian (rather, Albertan) journalists.

There is a certain sense of immediacy when I discuss the need to address the problems that Canada’s local news ecosystems face. These problems are not new, but they are becoming increasingly urgent to address as organizations continue to shutter their doors at rapid rates. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated some of these issues, further heightening the need for research in this area. This study is unique in combining these two issues with an aim to understand how they impact each other. This, my first research question asks what, if any, significance the state of local news has on professional identity development in journalists.

RQ1: To what extent does the current state of local news organizations in Canada affect the construction of a journalist's identity in rural settings?

Rural Lifestyles

Definitions of rurality are messy and “problematic”, as there is no single definition of what it means to be a rural entity (Mellow, 2005). Ruralness can be constructed and categorized through several measures, such as geographic location, cultural solidarity, spatial organization, size, or based on access to resources (Mellow, 2005). Reid et al. (2010) views rurality as a complex social space that is (re)produced by the actions, meanings, and relationships of people in a particular place and time (p. 269). For the purposes of this study, I use the meaning of rural as determined by the Government of Alberta in their list of designated rural communities (n.d.). The specific list of rural communities that I used to define my recruitment criteria is a document from the Government of Alberta outlining the province's rural and urban communities, based on the 2016 census (n.d.). This conception of rural accepts the institutional and political determinations of rural locales. Identifying ‘rural’ areas is a critical component of this study, however, determining the degree of ruralness of communities and journalists within these communities is outside of the parameters of this study.

Scholarship on working professionals in rural communities often focuses on licensed, skilled practitioners, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, educators, and clergy (Crowden, 2010; Mellow, 2005; Reamer, 2003; Reid et al., 2010). Journalistic work is professional in the sense of its implied power and symbolic capital in democratic societies, but there is no formal professionalization process or standard of journalistic practice. Nonetheless, there is still a strong occupational ideology associated with journalism due to this implied power (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). Journalists working in rural communities may face similar challenges that other

professionals face in these locales, such as working with fewer resources, adapting professional protocols to rural settings, and navigating dual relationships (Mellow, 2005). Dual relationships, particularly for professionals, can be harmful or beneficial depending on the nature of the relationship(s) and whether boundaries are respected, crossed, or violated (Reamer, 2003). Reamer (2003) distinguishes between violated and crossed boundaries in the context of social workers; boundary violations involve exploitative, harmful, deceptive, or coercive relationships and are flagrantly unethical, but boundary crossings are not intentionally exploitative or harmful, they can be helpful or have mixed signals (p. 122-123). Journalists can experience these dual relationships, particularly with the people who comprise their audience and their sources, as they are likely the journalists' own neighbours, acquaintances, etc. The relationship between journalists and news sources is one of power, which is lobbied back and forth between the two in repetitious cycles (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999) characterize the journalist-source relationship as the "negotiation of meaning between multiple groups within a social system constituted by a geographic community" (p. 126). Shared meanings between these groups are created and fostered by their interactions and relative closeness, something I expect is magnified in rural communities, which are traditionally seen as close-knit locales.

It is important to understand how rural communities differ from their urban partners, particularly in understanding levels of social solidarity and collective identity amongst residents. Linking community well-being to local solidarity and identity, community integration is crucial for social well-being (Greider et al., 1991). Greider et al. (1991) note that local identity and solidarity promote collective problem-solving for local issues and contribute to a heightened sense of belonging and membership (p. 265). Journalists working in rural communities may face unique challenges to this integration depending on their own geographical backgrounds and how much of

a local identity they take on in their work communities. While rural communities are much more closely aligned with the notion of *gemeinschaft*, conventional notions of professional (i.e., journalistic) work are more *gesellschaft*, aligning with sociological understandings of professionalism as objective, rational, and detached (Tönnies, 1983, qtd in Mellow, 2005, p. 52). It is expected that journalists in rural areas will adapt their behaviour, social patterns, and professional practices to accommodate their professional expectations in these communities, similar to Mellow's (2005) findings from her study on rural clergy. Mellow (2005) notes that clergy in rural areas adopted an informal approach to their work, crafting a prolific presence in their communities and engaging in significant personal interactions to build relationships (p. 61-62). Even with the implied sense of professional detachment, Mellow (2005) finds that the clergy were still known outside of their professional roles and had to work to maintain an "acceptable" degree of emotional distance (p. 63). These clergy moderated the *gesellschaft*-type norms expected of their position to adapt to rural ways of living and interaction, establishing distance and objectivity, but also putting in work to build trust with their community and "be there" (Mellow, 2005, p. 66-67).

This understanding of professional clergy roles in rural communities encompasses what I consider to be a similar paradigm for journalists in these communities—adapting professional practices to suit the needs of the community, ensuring that their presence in the community is heightened, and building relationships of trust with community members. O'Brien (2003) notes that journalists do not have to choose between practicing journalism and being an active community member, they can instead develop clear boundaries between professional and personal activities, simultaneously serving their audiences and serving their community in a built harmony. This is particularly important in the context of rapid social change in rural communities. In a

longitudinal study on three rural community newspapers in Canada and their adaptations to and coverage of the “new economy” of neoliberalization and globalization, Woodrow and Reimer (2014) find that these publications only superficially engaged with these changes; information that could have helped address community priorities was absent (p. 198). The authors recommend rural news organizations “reclaim” their place for information delivery over human interest stories to improve the communicative capacity of rural communities, however, I disagree on this point and add that human interest stories are often quite meaningful for rural audiences due to the closeness and familiarity audiences may have with the story’s content and source (Woodrow & Reimer, 2014, p. 198).

There are unique challenges that professionals working in rural communities face, whether it is dual relationships, informal professional norms, or crossed boundaries. The *gemeinschaft* nature of rural, professional work requires careful adaptation of professional norms and values to suit the often unique nature of rural communities. Following from this literature, my second research question looks to discover whether there are any specific challenges that journalists in these rural areas face in their work.

RQ2: What challenges do journalists in rural Albertan communities face and how do they overcome them?

Building a Professional Journalist

This research focuses on the construction of professional identity and the conceptualization of roles in rural communities. This study takes on the assumption that journalistic work is professional in nature, though I do not assume that all journalists ought to be professionally trained or employed in strictly professional organizations or settings. When journalism is spoken of as a

profession, it implies an understanding of the operations of journalism and invokes a set of norms and values that are typical to the field. Deuze (2005) lists five traits of journalists that are common among shared occupational ideologies, dubbing them “ideal-typical” elements of the profession: objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, ethics, and public service (p. 447). These types are explored in detail in this study and its findings. However, journalism may also be seen as an emergent profession, where there are no agreed upon knowledges and techniques and there are no standardized accreditation procedures, implying that journalism’s professional status does not rest on conventional notions of professionalism (Singer, 2003, qtd in Davidson & Meyers, 2015, p. 205; Sherwood & O’Donnell, 2018). One such example are codes of ethics. Since journalism is not a regulated profession, there is no single code of ethics that journalists ought to follow; rather they may adhere to an association’s document (see: Canadian Association of Journalists, 2011), an organization’s policy (see: Toronto Star, 2018), or their own personal/professional values in relation to their conduct as a journalist. Professionalism can also be exuded as a “status symbol” where workers present themselves as professionals to secure privilege, capital, material compensation and social status, and can enable workers to exercise a degree of autonomy over their work (Davidson & Meyers, 2015, p. 205). In the case of journalism, Davidson and Meyers (2015) suggest that professionalism is a rhetoric of “occupational devotion” experienced only by some journalists, particularly ones who have their careers embedded within institutional contexts (p. 205). The underlying and assumed notions on the professionalization of journalism shapes the field in complex ways. My study aims to understand how journalists construct professional identities. These underlying and un-spoken assumptions about the professionalization of journalism shape the field in complex ways. This project seeks to understand how journalists construct

professional identities within rural communities, but first, we need to determine what constitutes a professional journalist. To answer this question, I discuss changes to the journalism field.

The fundamental changes to the journalism field and industry in the past few decades is changing the way journalists conceptualize their professional identity, role, and job responsibilities in institutionalized settings. Deuze (2005), Russo (1998), Sherwood and O'Donnell (2018), and Young and Carson (2018) are some of the scholars who have explored these changes and how journalists have adapted to them. This study aims to continue this exploration within a specific time and place, contributing to other scholarly understandings of this change while also gaining an understanding of how local journalism is being conducted in rural Alberta communities. There are two related yet competing ideas when it comes to conceptualizing a professional identity in journalists—that professionalization occurs from a common set of values and ideals, which is discussed in this section, or that professional identity is linked to a journalist's work habits and practices, which is discussed in a later paragraph (Sherwood & O'Donnell, 2018, p. 1023). The first conceptualization hinges on a more cohesive and objective understanding of identity, kept together by the “social cement” of journalism's occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005, p. 442). This ideology also works to help us understand journalism in terms of how journalists give meaning to their work (Deuze, 2005). Deuze (2005) acknowledges that while these conceptualizations shift over time, the dominant ideology, that is, journalism's system of beliefs, is maintained (p. 445). Deuze (2005) notes that journalism's ideology encompasses the way news workers validate and give meaning to their work, characterizing it as a “strategic ritual and instrument” (p. 447).

Role conceptualization in the context of journalism looks at how journalists' professional roles ought to be developed and maintained and how these roles impact news content (Hellemueller & Mellado, 2015). Other scholars suggest journalist role conceptions influence the

professional identity of journalists, or that role conceptions encapsulate the most important aspect of the profession as determined by the individual journalist (Albæk et al. 2014; Glogger, 2019). Vos et al. (2019) note that journalist roles have been termed many things throughout history: gatekeeper, watchdog, disseminator, interpreter, opportunists, etc., but, similar to identity and professional expectations, these labels only capture a portion of journalistic work and there are differences amongst journalists on how strongly they encapsulate these roles (p. 1011). A structural approach to a journalist's role may have difficulty accounting for the variability in the role and with personal negotiations with sources. Instead, a symbolic interactionist paradigm is used with this research, as it encapsulates how professional roles are constantly negotiated by journalists (Hellemueller & Mellado, 2015; Holton et al., 2016).

It is also important to note that role conceptualization is not describing role performance; the former describes how journalists believe they should do their work, while the latter describes what journalists do (Holton et al., 2016). Tandoc and Peters (2015) focus on role strain in journalists who occupy dual media roles, citing issues such as role overload and role conflict for journalists, particularly when it comes to prioritizing one role over another. These issues are said to be mitigated through delegation and task compartmentalization (p. 326). Hellemueller and Mellado (2015) believe that structure may place constraints on journalists' autonomy and agency when fulfilling professional obligations and role performance, but they argue that these roles are fluid, and the construction of news content relies on interactions with sources (p. 6). As it relates to symbolic interactionism, actors in social structures take on particular roles and statuses, which come with specific conventions for behaviour and interaction (Stryker, 1968). These actors then internalize these expectations with respect to their own behaviour, described to be a product of the role-making process, which develops through interactions among actors (Stryker, 1968, p. 559).

Journalists enact their role in interactions with audiences, sources, and other journalists. Their internalization of these behaviours, which describe the building of a professional identity, is influenced and (re)shaped by the roles they have in professional settings.

As changes in technology, job demands, and workplace habits have been occurring, changes in professional identities and roles are being noted and studied, particularly in this study. It is acknowledged that changes in the nature of journalistic work is directly challenging the traditional roles of journalists, to both positive and negative results (Russo, 1998). On the positive side, we see a much-needed dismantling of the power structures within the journalism industry that often gatekeep the craft to those with, typically, white, male, and heterosexual privilege (see: Winberg, 2015). Negatively, there is an evident struggle on the part of journalists to adapt to changes to their roles, whether they are related to job duties, as Young and Carons (2018) suggest, professional norms as Bakker (2014) suggests, or methods of doing journalism, as Broersma and Singer (2021) note. These issues are also discussed in depth by the participants of this study. However, concerning job loss, Sherwood and O'Donnell (2018) find that professional identities were likely to fade after the loss of a job, pointing to the strong work context in which journalist identities are built and the apparent linking of professional identity to job duties. In a study analyzing job advertisements for news writers following the Great Recession, Young and Carson (2018) find that employers view journalism as a trade versus a profession, hiring for centralized, low-pay positions where personal attributes were more in demand than formal qualifications, such as education or training. The authors note that these job ads also suggest a lack of capability on the part of employers to adjust to digital transitions (Young & Carson, 2018). Contributing to these identity changes are changes in job duties for journalists, which marks a substantial finding in this study. Bakker (2014) posits four themes to mark some of the changes to a journalist's role: 1) the

technical journalist, which encompasses new expectations on journalists to develop the necessary skills for digital journalism and technology, 2) the community manager, which places the onus on the journalist for managing and editing user-generated content in digital environments, 3) the curator, which describes techniques needed to pull information from several sources to compile a story, and 4) the entrepreneurial journalist, which discusses changes in journalism education to teach new journalists to be more entrepreneurial in “turbulent economic times” (pp. 598-599). Overall, Young and Carson (2018) surmise that employers have an important say in determining the nature of journalism practice, (re)defining the profession and its associated ideologies (p. 453). Grubenmann and Meckel (2017) suggest that journalists ought not to be seen as “victims” of change, rather they can transform these structures through their own actions, emphasizing the individualized nature of the creation of a professional identity (p. 734). On the other hand, Broersma and Singer (2021) find that young journalists do not necessarily see themselves as “change agents”, rather they envision changing journalism through more digital and technological means (p. 834). This individual “sensemaking” combined with the overarching notion of shared values and ideals of professional identity is illustrative of the “reciprocal interaction” between the micro-level of journalists’ activities and the macro-level concepts of journalists’ roles and identity (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017, p. 744). Grubenmann and Meckel (2017) argue this shows the profession’s flexibility and openness to change, and how roles can be easily manipulated or molded to certain structures. Taking note of these interactions and its influence on the creation of journalistic identity is key in this study, and it contributes to a noted lack in data on role conceptions in different forms of journalism, such as weekly papers or small news desks (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017). The study from Grubenmann and Meckel (2017) focuses on a daily newspaper, likely due to the considerable number of staff employed at the organization,

providing the authors with a cohesive understanding of the organization as a whole. My focus is on individual journalists operating within small newsrooms, likely with less than ten staff members, providing a unique insight into the professional values of rural journalists and how being in a rural community influences the development of professional identities of these journalists.

Overall, the production of journalism is a highly contextual and personal endeavour, but it also appears to be guided by a common set of values and principles, informally defined by the actors within the journalism field. The roles of journalists are changing fast with the advance of digital technologies and socioeconomic change, and as such, the development of professional identities are fluid and based on social interactions and social location. This study looks to extend existing work and theories related to professional identity development and apply them to the understudied areas of rural journalism, encompassing my last research question.

RQ3: How is the identity of a journalist constructed and maintained in small, rural news markets in Alberta?

Methodology

Local news research encompasses many distinct types of media outlets and presents a large field of possibilities. For the purposes of this project, I am interested in observing how journalists in rural communities contribute to their local news system(s), as people doing journalism in “small-market” newsrooms face different challenges, particularly in rural communities where newsrooms are typically small with a limited number of staff (Lindgren et al., 2019). Lindgren et al. (2019) use the American definition of “small-market” in their report, which are either daily or weekly newspapers with a print circulation of under 50,000. Given that this project focuses on news publications in designated rural communities, which typically have a population a fraction of the circulation size, “micro-market” may be a more applicable descriptor, although there is no agreed upon definition of a standardized market size for newspapers. Studies focusing on small-market newspapers use both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore a variety of topics: in-depth interviews to understand the impact of the digital realm on newspapers (Ali & Radcliffe, 2017); a mix of interviews and surveys to research the adoption of digital technologies in newsrooms (Ali et al., 2018); and a nationwide survey of newspapers to gain a snapshot of small-market conditions (Lindgren et al., 2019). My study specifically narrows the field of study to highlight rural journalists and discuss their working conditions, their personal journalistic philosophies, and the adaptations they have made in the face of rapidly changing local news systems, recessions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a gap in scholarly research on journalists working in small markets, particularly in rural settings. This study is unique in its focus, methodology, and scope, and contributes to an enhanced understanding of small-market newsroom practices and highlights the difficult and important work that journalists in these markets do, as well as it provides a nuanced view on local news in Canada.

Research on local news systems, particularly in Canada, heavily focuses on the health of news organizations and the impacts that newsroom closures have on the media landscape in the country (see Lindgren and Corbett, 2020). Research on local news highlight the impact community news has on communities and is primarily conducted utilizing surveys and map-making. With an explicit goal to understand how professional identity is created by journalists working in rural communities in Alberta, using a qualitative approach to capture the in-depth and described experiences of these journalists was essential. There is a knowledge gap in understanding the lived and self-described experiences of journalists in these local news systems, which is what prompted my interest in this research. I aim to contribute significantly to existing literature on local news in Canada by providing an insight in how the journalists themselves operate within these systems and how they navigate the challenges of producing quality journalism in the 21st century. The method of in-depth interviews were chosen for their detail, connection with the subjects, and their fit with the topic. For research within news organizations, Kavoura and Bitsani (2014) argue that qualitative interviewing is considered among the most appropriate methods. Interviewing actors within institutions, such as media organizations, can provide insight on firsthand experiences that can be contrasted against administrative data (p. 545). In this case, administrative data will encompass the state of local news systems in Canada, which cover media closures, mergers, and the overall financial health of news organizations. The overall aim of this research is to understand how a sampling of rural journalists approach organizational challenges, their work, and their lifestyles. Through these interviews, we can link stories and experiences together to weave a narrative about some of the lifestyles of journalists in rural communities.

What is particularly interesting about this topic and approach is the familiarity that many journalists may already have with research methods. A core practice of journalism is interviewing

people for stories, so putting journalists in the position of the interviewee presents several interesting methodological considerations. Bowd (2004) writes on this shift, noting that the implications of “interviewing the interviewers” has been largely neglected by researchers (p. 117). Of the utmost importance, Bowd (2004) argues, is establishing rapport with the subject, as journalists are often “accustomed to being in control of the questioning and direction of an interview”, which can impact the interview process and its impact on the subject and the researcher (p. 118). However, because journalists are already familiar with the interview process, there is not the same potential for discomfiting experiences that may occur during the interview (Bowd, 2004). For this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized to offer familiarity to the subjects and to understand lived experiences and points of view from the respondent’s perspective (Tracy, 2020).

As a trained journalist, conducting qualitative insider research was important to me, as my own views, biases, and personal connections with the topic are interwoven throughout this research. I approached my subjects as equal partners in the data creation process and presented myself as a friend and colleague, engaging in lengthy impression management techniques and positioning myself as a co-creator of the research and its findings. Greene (2014) writes that a big issue with insider research is positionality, noting the importance of engaging in reflexivity and reflexive practices to establish and challenge researcher bias. A positive of insider research is my own familiarity with the subject, allowing for the potential of richer, more nuanced data to emerge through my ability to ask more “meaningful questions” and project a “more truthful” or “authentic” understanding of the subject (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). However, this familiarity presents a challenge for me as the researcher, as my involvement can be considered too subjective, leading to a loss of objectivity on my end (Greene, 2014). The notion of objectivity in my research is an

important one to note, as objectivity is key for journalists as well. Upheld as the golden rule of journalism, I instead wish to challenge the notion of objectivity in my research and within journalism as an impossible ideal that instead leads to binary thinking about subjects and creates unfair or unrealistic divisions and boundaries between reporters and their work. I acknowledge that I cannot be truly objective in this work, nor do I wish to be—the purpose of this project is to understand the realities, challenges, and difficulties that reporters in rural communities face in their work, and how the notion of a journalistic identity is both socially constructed and situated; both points that are rendered null if we embrace the notion that there exists some objective understanding or approach to the topic. To overcome this barrier, I utilize what Greene (2014) terms “disclosure” to my participants, to approach this research more ethically and be forthcoming about my own identity, as is necessarily relevant to the research. This disclosure involved me discussing my motivations for the project to participants and detailing my own involvement with rural journalism at the outset of the interview. Another important part of the methodological process was engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity is based on a Bourdieusian practice of actively engaging oneself over the course of the research in our assumptions, perceptions, and relationships with others (Greene, 2014, p. 9). Central to this is the notion of power, as the researcher occupies a position of power over their participants. To help mitigate this, Greene (2014) notes that researchers can establish a degree of distance from their subjects, as well as engage in an extended analysis of our own social and emotional positions, and how they might influence the relationship we have to our project and subjects. Another way to address reflexive practices in my research is to understand and acknowledge the multi-layered relations with myself, between myself and the research subjects, and between my research and my

audience (Doucet, 2007). Of the utmost importance in this process is recognizing that I am not a neutral party in this research (Adams, 2012).

Methods

In narrowing the area of study, the province of Alberta was chosen for several reasons: its proximity to the researcher, the researcher's social networks in the province, and the researcher's knowledge of the local news system in Albertan communities. For the study, participants must have been 18 years of age or older, speak English fluently, and be affiliated with or an employee of a news publication in a designated rural community in Alberta. Recruitment was done in several ways: most significantly through direct emails to reporters, editors, and publishers, as well as through my own personal social media channels. I used the website ABYZ News Links as a guide to identify news publications in rural communities, as the website contained direct links to the organization's website². Many news organizations in these communities are weekly newspapers, but there are a handful of radio stations in rural communities with a news desk still in operation. In cases where the publication was still in operation and had contact information publicly listed on their website, an email was sent directly to a reporter within the organization, provided their email was listed on their organization's website. I reached out to more than 71 individuals in rural communities in all areas of Alberta. Most of this correspondence was through email (71 journalists emailed), but a couple of requests were submitted through an organizational website in instances where I was unable to find a publicly listed email address for a journalist in the organization.

Of the handful of responses I received, I interviewed nine participants for this study. Semi-structured interviews with the participants took place between July and August 2021. See *Appendix*

² See: <http://abyznewslinks.com/canadab.htm>.

A for a copy of my interview guide, which details the questions I asked the participants of the study. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical locations of some of the participants, seven of the nine interviews were conducted online over Zoom software. Two interviews were conducted in-person at the subject's place of work. Interviews ranged between 70 to 130 minutes, with a median recorded interview time of 89 minutes. Interviews conducted over Zoom were recorded using the software's internal recording mechanism, with a handheld recorder and a cell phone used as backups. Interviews conducted in person were recorded with a handheld recorder and a cell phone. An interview guide provided several themes around which the questions were structured: 1) the participants' role at their organization and what their work involves, 2) the participants' background in journalism, including education, 3) the participants' community, specifically the community or communities they cover for work, 4) the participants' views on journalism as a profession and their professional practices, and 5) the participants' views on the state of local news in their community, in the province of Alberta, and in Canada, as well as reflections on their job duties within a changing industry. Audio recordings were initially transcribed using Otter.ai software, and a second transcription was done manually to ensure errors in the transcripts were corrected and tone was reflected. To engage in reflexivity in the transcription process, I shared transcripts with the participants who indicated on their consent form that they would like to (re)view their transcript prior to it being analyzed, to ensure the transcript was accurate and keeping with the subject's words.

Analysis of the data was done with NVivo qualitative analysis software. In an effort to encourage reflexivity, I utilize grounded theory in my subsequent analysis of the data. Grounded theory is a method of qualitative theoretical analysis that builds theory out of the data collected, through intensive and exhaustive analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2006). This is done primarily

through analytic coding; data is analyzed through several varying rounds of coding, where themes are expected to emerge from the data and be refined through further analysis. Charmaz's (2006) work emphasizes the construction of theory from our involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices, offering an interpretation of the topic rather than a whole picture of it (p. 10). Constructive grounded theory utilizes reflexivity to socially situate our research and consider the conditions in which our data has been collected and how the subsequent analysis is created (p. 131). In using this method, I can incorporate and interrogate my own interpretations of the data and the significant role I, as the researcher, play in the knowledge creation process.

Findings

This section outlines the findings from this study, extensively highlighting what the participants had to say regarding the research objectives. My first research question looks to understand how the state of local news in Canada impacts the development of a journalist's professional identity, while my second question inquires about the challenges that journalists in rural communities face in their professional work, as I hypothesize that some of these challenges may be unique to rural journalists. As outlined in an earlier section, Canada's local news ecosystems face several existential challenges, and it is clear from my findings that journalists in rural areas feel this pressure—one theme that emerged during my conversations was the impact of industry changes on their role—as some respondents reported increased responsibilities and diminishing staff sizes, for example. Though not an explicit research inquiry, I discussed with each participant how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their work and their role. Journalists around the world were suddenly given the immense responsibility of passing on critical health and safety information to audiences and faced numerous challenges as a result of their heightened importance. Most of the participants interviewed noted experiencing some form of change or challenge brought on by the pandemic. My last research question looks at how professional identities are developed in journalists. Predominantly, there is an imperative for strong local coverage that many respondents felt they owed to their community because of their professional position and role, contributing to an idea of how identity and roles become constructed in journalists. Most respondents also reported strong attachments to their community and many also discussed their dual roles as a citizen and a reporter, another finding that I attribute to the building of a professional identity in rural communities. In the findings, I explore the latter research question first, highlighting the importance of community to journalists and providing context on their

professional relationships and connection to their community. Then, in the second section, I explore my findings related to the journalism field and the journalism industry in Canada, making connections to what the participants said about their communities and how it manifests in their feelings toward the journalism industry.

Demographics

To provide an overview of the journalists interviewed, Table 1 outlines the professional roles and geographical locations of the participants within the province of Alberta. Of note, each participant consented to using their real names in this study. As one participant Carol said, “I’m a true believer, if it’s going to come out of your mouth, you better put your name to it.” Participants were asked to provide their gender identity and pronouns, as well as their job title. Though most of the respondents worked in a weekly newspaper publication, I interviewed someone who worked at a radio station, providing a more diverse representation of rural media in Alberta.

In Alberta, there are colloquially three main geographic regions outside of the major CMAs, Calgary, and Edmonton. These geographic areas are Southern Alberta, which covers most of the area parallel to and south of Calgary; Central Alberta, which largely covers the area between the Calgary and Edmonton CMAs; and Northern Alberta, which encompasses areas north of Edmonton. For demographic information, I have indicated the area where the participants live by providing their geographic location as *Coverage Area*. However, not every participant was based in their coverage community. Lexi was in the midst of an internship with her organization as part of her post-secondary education when I interviewed her. This internship was conducted remotely, so Lexi was residing in the Calgary CMA while providing news coverage for a publication located in Northern Alberta. As such, she did not live in her coverage community, which is reflected in Table 1 below (*Coverage Area*).

The community population sizes that these journalists lived in ranged from 1,201 in the smallest community, to 27,088 in the largest community, according to the 2021 Census (Statistics Canada, 2022). The average community size in this study is 8,867, though this is not necessarily indicative of the variety of community sizes in this study. I aimed for near-balanced geographic representation in my recruitment, though my sample features more journalists from Southern Alberta, I attribute this to my own geographic location in Southern Alberta and perhaps the participants' recognition of my academic institution, also based in Southern Alberta.

Lastly, based on my conversation with each participant, I inferred the amount of time they have spent working as a journalist (*Yrs in Industry*) as well as the amount of time they have lived in the community they cover as a journalist (*Yrs in Comm.*). The average amount of years in the industry for my participants is 18.17, but it is important to note that there are significant differences amongst the participants; several of them were near the end of their career after working decades in the field, while others were just getting started. The average number of years in their community for the respondent is 15.78.

Table 1: Demographic and professional information about the study's participants as of 2021.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Job Title</i>	<i>Organization Type</i>	<i>Coverage Area</i>	<i>Yrs. in Industry³</i>	<i>Yrs. in Comm.</i>
<i>Stan</i>	Male	Regional Editor	Weekly newspaper	Southern Alberta	10	10
<i>Carol</i>	Female	Owner	Weekly newspaper	Northern Alberta	32	50
<i>Lexi</i>	Female	Multimedia Journalist	Weekly newspaper	Northern Alberta	<1	0
<i>Hannah</i>	Female	News Reporter	Radio station	Northern Alberta	4	22
<i>Sandra</i>	Female	Reporter and Photographer	Weekly newspaper	Southern Alberta	35	14
<i>Frank</i>	Male	Editor and Publisher	Weekly newspaper	Southern Alberta	41	20
<i>Terri</i>	Female	Multimedia Journalist	Weekly newspaper	Central Alberta	4	3
<i>Simon</i>	Male	Editor	Weekly newspaper	Central Alberta	15	6
<i>Rob</i>	Male	Editor	Weekly newspaper	Southern Alberta	22	20

³ Referring to the amount of time the participant has spent working in a journalistic or editorial role. This excludes any post-secondary education the respondent may have received.

Key Themes

There are several key themes highlighted in my findings that can be grouped together under two main banners, which are presented in the following pages. The first banner encapsulates the themes related to service to community and the pursuit of journalism in rural communities. Themes under this banner explore the tensions between the “ideal-typical” elements of journalism and the realities of rural journalism (Deuze, 2005). The second main banner relates to the participants’ own perceptions of and feelings toward the journalism industry in Canada. This part of my data explores the challenges that participants face in their work and contextualizes the noted issues in the media field in Canada, such as declining revenues, job losses and changes, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Service to Community and to Journalism

This section outlines my findings related to community and doing journalism in communities. Notable subsections analyze my findings related to a perceived imperative for local coverage felt by the journalists; strong feelings of connection and duty towards their communities; developing public appearances; and a dedication to building relationships with audiences and sources.

Objectivity and Service to Journalism

As discussed earlier, Sherwood and O'Donnell (2018) theorize two possibilities of how a journalist's professional duty and identity may be constructed—through occupational ideologies or personal work habits and values. It is evident from my conversations with the participants that both methods were used to build professional roles. Many participants discussed traits such as honesty, objectivity, being balanced, and being accurate as some of the most important qualities of a journalist, indicating a strong alignment with “ideal-typical” elements of journalism (Deuze, 2005, p. 447). Overwhelmingly, the journalists in this study make note of a sense of responsibility or duty for providing their community with, notably, balanced news coverage. Another finding was the compartmentalization of personal and professional relationships with other community members. During conversations with participants, they were asked to discuss what being a journalist meant for them, as well as the role(s) they believe that journalists play in both democratic societies, such as Canada, and in their own community. It is clear from the beginning that the participants have strong community attachments, which is illustrated by Carol's quote on being a trustworthy community member and how that reflects in developing her trustworthiness as a journalist. Carol aligns with objective notions of journalism when she discusses leaving her

opinions out, but this is contrasted against some of her later statements when she talks about putting her community first and standing up for her community.

“As long as I'm honest with my community ... I'm very open. I don't hide anything from anyone. They know me, I've been here my whole life. So, the community knows me. They know they can trust me and what I write about is the truth. I try to keep my opinions out.”
– Carol

“I know all these people, and I see them at their best, and I see them at their worst, and sometimes you just need to keep a little bit of distance in order to be objective as a journalist, which is why I'm here. ... I came here to run a newspaper. That's my priority. That's how I feel I can serve the community best. It's not always comfortable, but it's the way it is.” – Frank

For Frank, taking caution not to “take sides” is justified as necessary in order to strictly inform audiences without being biased, allowing readers to form their own opinions based on their interpretation of a story. There is an implied feeling of duty in Frank's words, one that is influenced by adherence to journalistic expectations rather than communal expectations. The expectation of objectivity is clear, as Terri illustrates that she uses her ability to be neutral as a point of pride in her work, highlighting an impression management tactic as well. Lexi uses the phrase “moral obligation” in describing her work as a journalist, again pointing to the importance of objectivity as a professional norm in the participants' roles.

“It's very much being neutral. In a lot of situations when a lot of people can't be, you need to be neutral or at least be able to balance both sides of the fence, understand where everyone is coming from. So, I try to pride myself on that.” – Terri

“I do think that there's a moral obligation that comes with the title of journalism, and making sure what you put out is correct, it's not going to mislead somebody. So, there is an obligation to make sure, like, do I know this for sure, before I put it out there?” – Lexi

In journalism, the notion of showing “both sides” is traditionally used to present as much information to readers as possible that allows them to come to a stance on an issue without undue influence. However, this obviously has set dangerous precedents when it comes to the proposed

rationalization of horrific and traumatic incidents, such as residential schools, police brutality, climate change, and acts of domestic terrorism, to name a few examples. There is no way or need to be neutral when it comes to discussing these events and journalists are often on the frontlines of controlling the narrative around incidents such as these. Because journalists are in a significant position of power in democratic societies, there is a moral expectation for journalists to call out and directly challenge false dichotomies in the stories they cover. Traditional forms of journalism operate within capitalistic business structures and many have difficulty adapting to these obligations, but there are significant advances being made in certain types of media organizations, which scholars have dubbed “alternative journalism” (see: Lockett, 2019, for a case study related to alternative media in Canada).

Impression Management

Impression management involves managing the presentation of the self during interactions (Goffman, 1959). This can be done by dealing with the impressions that are given and the implied impressions given off. In this study, the key impression management tactics that the rural journalists used involve the use of clothing and giving off impressions of care and empathy to others. The clothing is used to make the participants more approachable and distinctly establish themselves as journalists. Giving off the impression that the journalists care about who they speak to is a vital tactic in this role, particularly when it comes to building relationships with community members. Frank and Rob, for example, discuss the importance of empathy in their work when it comes to interacting with others, no matter the size of the issue.

“Well, one of the big ones, and I don't hear this talked about a lot, is empathy. I think you have to be able to look at people and understand their side of things.” – Frank

“Empathy is essential because if you're talking to someone about, and it doesn't even have to be something like a death or a fire, which is the most where that demands empathy, but it's something like a lady phones me and says that the town just put in a new sidewalk, and they trucked in a bunch of dirt and now it's just weedy everywhere. But she just felt like no one was listening to her, well, you know, that makes it even more important for me to be empathetic and listen to her and not just blow her off or roll my eyes or sigh, right? So, that's where that empathy part comes in. It's for anything big or small.” – Rob

Frank and Terri use their clothing to indicate their journalist status to others. For Frank, this took on additional importance as he wanted to be seen as a professional. This feeling reinforces the conceptions of self that Solomon (1970) found in their work on Army Officers, where certain expectations are in place for behaviour and role execution. Frank and Terri perform in their role through the clothing they wear, as they have internalized a set of guidelines for presenting themselves as working professionals, a parallel to many other occupations and a clear allusion to the popular phrase ‘dress for success’. For Terri in particular, dressing “country-esque” helps her fit in with her community and allows her to build relationships with both sources and audiences.

“When we came here, I had, in my mind, an idea of an image that we wanted to present that we took this seriously, that we were professionals. So, I'm gonna dress for the professional. And quite often I'm the only guy in the room with a tie on. But it's just me. ... I try to present a professional image. ... Many people learn pretty quickly that you're the newspaper guy.” – Frank

“I dress very country-esque. Because I am a country person [laughs]. But yeah, it tends to work really well with people because in my community, it's very much agricultural based as well. There's a lot of farmers, a lot of ranchers out here, so it's really important to be presentable and approachable. ... But that's what feels comfortable to me and that's kind of how I like to present myself as very approachable, because I want people to feel instantly comfortable when they're speaking with me.” – Terri

There is a gendered nature to Terri's comment of wanting to be friendly and approachable and make others feel comfortable, an example of the emotional labour⁴ that female journalists engage

⁴ “Emotional labour” is a term coined by sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild (1983) that describes the labour that others, namely women, must perform in managing their emotions for their work to meet the professional and emotional expectations of their job. For Hochschild (1983), this is exemplified by the “warm feelings” flight attendants must have for airline passengers. In this study, this is exemplified by the “personable” demeanour that Lexi is expected to have in her work as a journalist.

in. Terri must manage her emotions so that she has a calming and welcoming presence when meeting with others. We see these gendered expectations with Sandra, who now has to engage in impression management through her clothing choices after getting complaints that she was not wearing appropriate attire to an event as a journalist. Gurung et al. (2018, p. 555) finds that when women stray from the “in code” expectations of their outfits, they are perceived as not being professional enough and are subsequently discriminated against for not dressing to their gendered code expectations, which both Terri and Sandra’s quotes illustrate.

“You have to be professional all the time. I was once covering a rodeo here, as matter of fact, and I was on holidays, covering this as a favor and my boss calls me and he says, where are you? I said, I’m at the rodeo. He says, I understand you’re wearing shorts. I said, well, actually, if you really want to know I’m wearing sweatpants. But you were wearing shorts, he says. I say, what are you talking about? Apparently, he got a call that I was at the rodeo, and I was wearing shorts, and I didn’t look professional. So now I have to go to a rodeo, because of this one complaint when it’s 100 degrees out, and I have to wear jeans. Like, what? To this day, no one has said that. But somebody actually complained that I was wearing shorts. Every woman there was wearing shorts. It was like 80 degrees that day. So, that’s when you learn that you’re in small town, right?” – Sandra

Impression management is a valuable tool in the journalists’ toolbox, as it helps them mark their presence in public and also aids them in building relationships with community members. As Frank noted earlier, he wears a shirt and tie to work every day to project his professional image, and he has come to be known in his community for this. By being consistent in his impression management techniques, Frank was able to build relationships off the impressions he gave to others. These tactics are used to build trust with community members and highlight important work that these journalists must do to build and strengthen their relationships with their communities.

Relationship-Building with Sources and Audiences

Some of the most important discussions I had with the participants centered on community—their feelings about working in rural communities as well as their relationships with

other community members in both personal and private spheres. These findings are explored in this section, starting with observations about the relationship between journalists and their sources, and a discussion on relationships with audiences. Attention is drawn to how in rural areas these relationships can be difficult to separate, as today's audience member may be tomorrow's source.

Sources

Sources are vital in the work of a journalist, but these relationships are often predicated on relations of power, as journalists tend to amplify and give legitimacy to the voices of those who are in positions of power and privilege, and often silence of citizen voices (see: Gurleyen & Hackett, 2016). Understanding that the relationships between journalists and sources involve the negotiation of meaning, I was curious whether this negotiation changed in rural communities, where more community members and citizens are likely to occupy these positions of power. Journalists often speak to the same sources in their work—for example, members of their town or city council, school officials, organizational spokespersons, and sport coaches. Having a professional, functional relationship with sources is key for some respondents, particularly due to the size of their community and the potential for overlapping relationships. This relationship represents a direct enactment of the role that the participant takes as a journalist and provides insight into how the respondents constructed their role as a working professional. Sandra says she realizes that these relationships are some of the most important ones she will have in her community, while Simon says he does not have a lot of personal relationships in their community as a result of their need to have sources as part of their work.

“You know as a reporter that you have lots of sources, and you don't want to burn those bridges. I have lots of sources, and I will not burn my bridges. I try to be very careful with what I say.” – Sandra

“For me, it's mostly working relationships. I try to stay in touch with people from different organizations just to kind of try and keep the word out as to what they're up to. I guess I can't say that I've necessarily become best friends with people in the community or anything like that. Because then you do walk into the territory of bias, appearance or whatnot.” – Simon

In terms of identity and role-building, it is clear from what Sandra says that being knowledgeable about one's community and the key players within it are vital to a journalist's success in the community. Developing relationships with these sources, such as the RCMP and elected officials as Sandra notes, is key to the professional duties of journalists. The purposeful guarding of personal values as noted by Simon represents an attempt to cement their professional identity and values as it relates to journalism and maintain an “acceptable” degree of emotional distance, similar to what Mellow (2005) notes in her study on rural clergy (p. 63).

One important noted quality about journalists in this study was the need to be respectful of others. This is a common sentiment with respondents, who highlight the importance of not offending or not talking down to their readers and listeners. Gaining respect and trust was an important part of working in small communities for many respondents.

“I try to build really good relationships with people, and I want when we talk to people ... I want them to say, yeah, they did a good job, I could tell that they cared, the person that I talked to, they were nice, they were very professional. I want to be that person that I know people can go, yeah, we trust them to handle the news that we want to be told, we trust that if there's a certain amount of delicacy that's needed, we can handle that. So, that I take a lot of pride in, knowing that and that I'm pushing myself to be improving, and that I'm making sure that I put on a good face for the station that I'm representing.” – Hannah

When journalists speak to others for interviews or through regular interaction, they can be implicitly or explicitly representing their organization and their job. How the journalist makes this representation and how it is received, is an important form of impression management. Hannah notes that making her sources feel like they could confide in her was important, both for her identity as a journalist and in upholding the reputation of her workplace.

Audiences

In addition to cultivating relationships with sources, journalists must also make a connection with their audiences. Audiences in rural communities typically consist of members of that community, many of whom rely on their local news outlet to provide them with updates about their community, advertise events, and feature the achievements of other community members.

“It's definitely a weird relationship you have with people. The funny thing is, is that I know a lot of people in these communities, but I don't know them, you know. I know them from talking to them on the phone, or seeing them at events where they're different, right? They're showing a persona themselves.” – Stan

Going into this study, I expected respondents to rely heavily on cultivating strong relationships with their audience to build support for their work and cement their presence as an in-the-know local. I found this sentiment to be true, as Stan makes an interesting note that when he meets people in his community, they too are putting on a performance for him. This highlights the performance aspect of dramaturgy that I expected to find during this study and reinforces the constructed nature of professionalization in rural communities.

Blurred Boundaries

There is a certain degree of crossover when it comes to sources and audiences, particularly in rural areas. Small communities still have the same source pools for journalists—such as councils, boards, etc.—but the pool with which these sources work and live in is much smaller, highlighting the concentrated degree of crossover in these two relationships. Hannah discusses the importance of preserving these relationships, particularly when it comes to sensitive news stories, as she notes that they cannot burn bridges with their sources or audiences. Carol echoes this concern as well and emphasize the importance of trust in her work.

“Relationships are really important. So, it is a fun balance that we have to strike, you've got to be able to put out the news that needs to be heard. But if the mayor hates us and will no longer talk to us, then any news that we need with the mayor, we can't get. ... We are rooted in the community, and everybody knows us. Everybody knows who we are. We don't have a huge amount of money and a huge amount of influence so that we can burn a bridge and that's fine.” – Hannah

“If somebody tells me something in confidence, I'm not running to the paper and writing the story for it. I'm very confidential. I truly believe that if I'm going to have a relationship with my community, they have to trust me. So, if I'm doing a story, they know I'm doing a story. I'm open about it, I don't hide behind anything. ... I need their trust, so I won't lose it, and I'll do everything I can to keep that trust going.” – Carol

Gaining trust is immensely important in journalistic work and highlights the necessity of impression management in this line of work. By actively building trust with community members through intentional actions, this process reinforces the development of professional values, norms, and identities amongst the participants.

Community Presence and Role Strain

Each respondent reported experiencing strong ties to their community, with some noting a feeling of service to the community and their audiences. It is evident that respondents take on special roles when interacting with audiences and their community, adapting their behaviour in order to best suit themselves, their organization, and their community. This is not an easy task—there is a precarious balance that these journalists must strike in building meaningful relationships while also doing their job to their perceived standard. What is particularly interesting is that most of the respondents developed these sentiments while working in their role as a journalist. The notion from Grubenmann and Meckel (2017) that journalists mold their professional roles to certain structures is present here, as the respondents describe how they approach their work and how it creates meaning within their respective communities.

“One of the things I talk about when I talk to new school principals is kind of describe what our kind of relationship is with the school. I tell them that we're telling the ongoing story of your school. So, now, it's the football team. In a week, it could be the academic awards, the week after that, it could be a lockdown, because someone brought a gun to school. The week after that, it's a Christmas concert. But my point being that I'm not going to blow that out of proportion, and I'm not going to show up at your school only when a kid brings a gun to school, I'm going to come to the school all the time, and it's going to be a continuous narrative of your school. And that's just one chapter in that story.” – Rob

“I answer to my community. I'm there for them. I'm not doing the paper for me. I'm proud of it. But I'm doing it for them. I'm doing it for past generations. I'm doing it for future generations. I want my grandkids one day to be living in this community, looking back at the paper and say grandma did that. That's my grandma. This is my history. This is where I came from. That's what I feel I owe my community.” – Carol

However, these dual roles as citizen and journalist are not without tensions. Particularly in rural communities, I expected this tension to be heightened, perhaps even causing significant barriers to the respondent's feelings of belonging in their communities. Somewhat surprisingly, these feelings were not as strong as I expected. Participants did note some tensions, but overwhelmingly, the respondents did not feel like they experienced two contrasting sets of relationships within their communities; rather many of them described experiencing no dissonance between the personal presentations of their selves and the professional, with some noted exceptions in regard to impression management. Simon addresses the strains he experiences in his role and alludes to his personable nature as a tactic. Sandra's quote highlights the tension I was expecting to see, making note that she can never truly be “herself” while out in public, due to the risk it poses to her professional identity as a journalist and her status in the community.

“It's almost gotten to a point where it's kind of informal in a sense, which is kind of nice, because I almost prefer that informal approach. People are a bit more comfortable and approachable, as opposed to this more tense-ish kind of interview situation. But typically, I find people are pretty receptive to chatting with me. I think all that stems from being able to kind of have that approachable personality, where you're just willing to carry a conversation.” – Simon

“Sometimes after a really long day, you need to run into a store to pick something up. And inevitably, the person ahead of you was so slow, or the cashier is standing there waiting for

the money and they're still putting their stuff into their cart. It's like get your wallet ready. Take your credit card out. And you want to yell at the people, and you want to yell at the cashier, but you have to bite your tongue because they know who you are. So, yes, you have to be professional all the time. As a reporter in a small town, or anyone in a small town, you always have to be respectful. Because everybody knows who you are.” – Sandra

Carol and Rob note the informality in which they operate as journalists in their community, highlighting an interesting finding: these respondents do not experience significant role strain in their profession, and have built a professional identity that is centered around their community, not just professional values and traditions. Professional identities have intermixed with personal ones in a way that I hypothesize is unique to these rural communities.

“I've been here so long. I pretty much know everybody in town. They trust me. The older people see me as their daughter because I've been around for so long. So, I don't think we differentiate. I don't see a difference.” – Carol

“I have never not been [the local journalist]. Even now, 20 years in, I don't know how many times I stop by somewhere and the conversation stops. It's very rare that people don't, and I know a lot of people, like all the doctors in town, it's the same for them. It's not [John Doe], it's Dr. [Doe]. That's who they are, their identity is what they do. And it's the same for me. Very much so.” – Rob

I attribute these strong feelings of community service to a few distinct factors: the length of time some of the individuals have spent in their community is significant, thus leading to strong feelings of attachment and belonging. The role that participants have in their community allows them to engage with the community on a regular basis and be a prominent or even revered member of that community, leading to increased feelings of belonging. Lastly, most of the participants grew up in rural areas, so they were already familiar with the values and norms present in rural communities and were able to integrate themselves and establish personal and professional identities based on an already-existing knowledge of ruralness. It is overwhelmingly evident that these respondents have strong attachments to their community and that this significantly shapes the development of a professional identity and their role construction in these areas. This throws

into question the strict adherence to journalistic objectivity that I noted in some of the participants—is objectivity possible when feelings toward community are as strong as they are? The participants seem to think so and I believe this finding shows that objectivity ought not to be conceptualized in a binary way; rather objectivity should be seen as a continuum in which community and journalistic values can intermingle in desirable and functionable ways.

“I’m not different because I’m wearing my newspaper or my counselor hat. I’m the same all the way. I am who I am. ... I’m very vocal, I’m very outspoken. My community means everything to me, and I will do anything to make it succeed. I don’t like it when people trash my community or people in my community, so I will protect them no matter what. It’s community first.” – Carol

“It’s my responsibility to be fair to people, I need to understand their different viewpoints on everything and to try to reflect it. In a community like ours, you kind of want to make sure that when people pick up the paper, they can see themselves in it, whether they’re Filipino or First Nations or Dutch or Mormon, you know, you want to make sure that they see themselves in the paper. Because we’re the community’s newspaper.” – Frank

For these journalists, serving their community through their work contributes to the development of a professional identity, and that development is also marked by adherence to traditional journalist values, and legitimizing themselves through impression management. These tactics are especially useful in rural communities, where these journalists are generally well-known and recognized because of their job. The development of their role as a professional aligns with Mellow’s (2005) notion that standards of professional work reflect Tönnies’ conceptualization of *gesellschaft*, where social relations are rationalized and objectified. Most respondents aligned with the traditional/typical view of journalism as a profession that must be neutral, fair, and balanced in its operation. This finding is discussed in more detail in a later section. Despite this noted neutrality, participants still felt strong connections to their community and take immense pride in the work that they do.

“A journalist to me is a recorder of time, they record the history of a certain time in place. For me, being a journalist in [my community] means I'm forever keeping track of that history. I'm like a timekeeper in this community and I'm very proud of that. ... I can't help it, I'm very proud of my community, I'm very proud of my job.” – Carol

As Frank summarizes:

“To do this job well, you have to like people, you have to like working lots of hours, you have to embrace the fact that you're part of the community and that you provide a service, right? Sometimes, I think about it in terms of I'm a little bit like a small-town preacher, these people are my congregation, right? Kind of preaching to them every week in terms of the paper I'm putting out. So, I have a relationship with the community at large, even though I'm not intimately acquainted with everybody. I feel a responsibility to serve them as best as I can.”

Frank makes an interesting statement in my discussion with him. Because him and his family have lived in their community for so long and have raised their family there, Frank is explicit in the fact that him and his spouse approach what they do as a “lifestyle”, integrating work duties with personal enjoyment. Exploration on the balance that the participants had between their work and personal lives is addressed in a later section, but it is important to highlight the level of commitment that Frank, and other participants, have to their work and their communities. Additionally, Frank’s religious metaphor is not lost on me; it is well-known that small and rural communities are bastions of religiosity (see: Chalfant & Heller, 1991) and using this to compare to his own work is a clever *entendre* that highlights the significance of rural religious practices and the implied closeness that congregations have with each other with the notion of how his own journalism serves his community. This feeling toward community was a significant theme amongst participants, with noted feelings of closeness and inclusion, but also a deliberate and disciplined setting of boundaries with community members. This finding explicitly aligns with the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* *gavotte* that Mellow (2005) found in their study on rural clergy members.

It is easy for people to say they love their community, but these journalists prove these claims every time they write a story. It is clear from my conversations with the participants that

their connections to their communities is a special one and is created and maintained by a significant amount of professional labour on the side of the journalist. Establishing a professional identity cannot be done without first understanding and knowing the surroundings in which they operate. Respondents who have been in their community for decades appear to have a more blended sense of professional and personal identity than do those who have only been in their community for a few years. It is logical that journalists who have been able to establish their lives significantly in the community they work in would have a greater sense of personal and professional belonging than those who are still new to the community or have yet to put down solid roots in that community. It seems that while occupational ideologies may guide how these journalists approach their work, there is a significant component of their professional conceptions of their role that are influenced by the community they reside in, as evidenced by the approaches these journalists had in interacting with their community. There is a substantial degree to which the community influences the working journalist, but there is another side of this study to explore: the field of journalism itself. It is no secret that the nature of journalistic work has, and continues to, rapidly change in the 21st century. How these journalists adapt to these changes and what it means for the future of journalism is explored in the next section.

Being a Journalist: The Journalism Industry and its Changes

Because of the focus of this study, my conversations with participants dealt primarily with their experience as journalists, their views on the journalism industry, and how they have been impacted by changes in the industry. Each respondent struggled with something in their work, whether it was compensation related, difficulty balancing work and life, or trying to adapt their skills and organization to new methods and techniques. These challenges are explored in depth in this section, which is broken down into further sub-sections to discuss various sets of observations. The first subsection will provide an overview of some of the duties of these journalists and operations within their organization, then I move into a discussion on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work of the respondents, highlighting both positive and negative effects on their work-life balance. The pandemic created ripple effects in these journalist's lives, both personally and professionally, as well as created change within their organizations. These changes and challenges are elaborated on in the next section, focusing on the impact of advertising and lost revenue, framing a larger discussion on change within the journalism field, both at a national and local level. Lastly, I conclude this section with a discussion on what being a journalist means to the participants, highlighting once more the importance of community in their work, while drawing attention to the fears that respondents expressed about the future of their work.

On Being a Journalist

Job and Operational Duties

There is no right way to be a journalist; skills related to journalism can be built through nearly any educational avenue, while the specific expectations and duties around journalistic work can be unique to the media organization. Many of the respondents adhered to traditional norms of

journalism, though it should be noted that these adherences were created through either their professional environment or through an education in journalism. Organizational norms were widely adopted by participants; however, it is important to emphasize the relative uniqueness of these norms in rural communities. Media outlets in rural areas face several challenges that are in a similar vein to what Mellow (2005) elaborates on in regard to rural clergy and professionalism—working with limited staff, limited resources, and changing organizational practices to best align with the community. Job duties are much broader in nature as opposed to publications in large, urban centres. As Stan describes, the work is not just limited to sitting at a desk and writing.

“You do become a jack of all trades, so to speak. You're doing a lot of different things; you're wearing a lot of different hats. In the newsroom you're doing layout, you're doing some graphic design, you're doing transcribing, you're interviewing you're answering phone calls, you're helping out at the office, it's not your typical nine to five job.” – Stan

There is a common saying in the industry that “news never sleeps”, and for communities that have one journalist serving them, this person is subject to inconsistent schedules and duties, presenting a unique challenge for rural news workers. Terri highlights the challenges she faces in this regard.

“For me, the biggest thing I've always struggled with personally, is essentially just the lack of consistency within the job, and how you're on everyone else's schedule. It's very hard to stay within a nine to five format when you're doing meetings at seven at night, and then there's a two-hour drive to get there and two hours back. ... There's so many weekends or evenings, there's all that so, I think that's been my biggest challenge, is just trying to remain as consistent as I can within a very inconsistent format.” – Terri

Two of the people I spoke with, Carol and Frank, owned and operated their publication. In addition to experiencing some of the challenges highlighted in this section, they also have an added responsibility of ensuring organizational stability and longevity. Frank considers his paper an integral part of his community and his identity, albeit to his own surprise.

“When we came here, to be honest with you, we weren't looking to stay a long time. We saw a chance to, from a pure business opportunity, that we could fix the paper up, improve

the revenue, and then sell it. We thought maybe five years, six years, and then [the community] just kind of grew on us. So, we thought we knew what we're getting into, but then we get here, and we find out that underneath it there's this really interesting social fabric that isn't apparent as you just drive through the community.” – Frank

Carol, who has been running her paper for decades, ran into an entirely new challenge when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“When COVID hit, things got really tough, and we lost all our advertising contracts. So, we went digital for a year, because I couldn't afford to keep printing. Recently we went back to print, but it's an unconventional print. I've got a big printing press that's not really impressive, a big photocopier. I do a lot of invoices and ticket books and stuff like that for businesses. So, I just print the newspaper off my big computer printer, and now I'm back to print. I do a digital component of that, I just email PDFs to those who want the digital end of it. That's where we're at right now and I'm looking at hiring a part-time advertiser to help get things back on track, and maybe I can get back to the actual newsprint print.” – Carol

The unconventional methods that Carol uses to publish her paper emphasizes the need for her publication to find unique workarounds to challenges presented by the pandemic and through general industry changes.

Perspectives on the State of Journalism

The massive and rapid changes in the journalism industry have upended traditional ways of conducting journalism and have changed the way the craft is done in professional organizations. Some of these changes have already been discussed—advertising shortfalls and the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I aim to show how the respondents view the overall state of journalism and to what degree, if any, their own experiences impact this view. Rollwagen et al. (2019) finds that despite these changes, Canadian journalists claim to have little to no influence on their work from politicians, governments, business, and other sociopolitical factors, and still strongly believe in neutrality and objectivity (p. 470). This attachment to objectivity is noted in this study, as many of the respondents cited the importance of their adherence to neutral reporting. Regarding

influence, some respondents voiced their dissatisfaction with government policies and practices that have contributed to the change in the media industry, namely through advertising and the Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) program⁵.

“I truly blame the downfall of our industry solely at the feet of our politicians that are in federal and provincial governments. They put all their energy and all their money into social media, knowing fully well it's going to destroy a complete industry. ... I think our revenue from the government between 2010 and 2012 was upwards of \$15,000-\$20,000 a year. Not a lot of money, but it kept the wolf away from the door. Now, my annual revenue from the federal government advertising is probably less than \$500 a year. That's a lot of difference and that's what's destroying this industry.” – Carol

Despite the challenges from these changes, organizations and journalists have made adaptations to be able to continue their survival in an increasingly hostile industry. Hannah has made personal adaptations by taking on more responsibility in her role, while Frank has integrated a number of additional services with his organization to be able to earn more revenue.

“So, there's been a lot of adapting to kind of taking more on my plate just out of necessity, from some of the changes, whether it's our company's changes or just how it goes, sometimes one or the other, or both. There's been a lot more responsibility, which I don't mind, but it is tough when you already have a very demanding job.” – Hannah

“There have been threats to small town papers always. The good ones have been able to weather it. We diversify, we do printing, we sell personal checks, we can get those done for you. If you want labels for things, we can do labels for you, we sell some stationery stuff, we print programs for the theatre and other organizations. We do a number of different things to keep some money coming in the doors, we weather the storm.” – Frank

While these changes and adaptations have greatly impacted these journalists, many of them still see a future for journalism, and for community organizations in particular. The respondents reported deep and personal attachments to their work and their communities, while also pointing out the true uniqueness of their roles in these areas. The next section discusses the various

⁵ The LJI program is an initiative spearheaded by the Government of Canada that allocated funding to news organizations so they can hire reporters to cover “underserved communities” and “news deserts” across the country, with an explicit objective to “increase local civic journalism” (News Media Canada, n.d.).

challenges that the participants face in their day-to-day work, from the COVID-19 pandemic and to advertising revenues.

Challenges to Doing Rural Journalism

COVID-19

Many workers experienced severe disruptions to their work schedule when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and journalists were not spared from this. Journalists had an added responsibility of communicating vital public health information to mass audiences. For journalists working in rural communities, while they did not necessarily focus on the minute details, they were still responsible for reporting COVID-related news in their area, which required a significant amount of time and effort. A big theme that emerged in my conversations was the increase in job duties and responsibilities for the participants. As companies began rapidly losing revenue, some chose to make cuts at the bottom, greatly impacting the media workers on the front lines of pandemic coverage. Hannah felt the impacts of this severely, as she took on the workload of three people. Sandra noted these struggles as well but emphasized the need to continue for the sake of the work.

“The pandemic was very tricky. ... I worked the newsroom solo for eight months, from March until October. I was doing 10-hour days, six days a week, for about a month and a bit. So, that was really tough. I still don't know how I managed to do it. ... I just turned 20 at the time. That was probably the toughest. But I definitely grew the most in that year, because you kind of had to, and I'll know a lot of my confidence came from that because it was like, well, no one else is gonna do it. So, you've got to figure it out.” – Hannah

“I cross my fingers every day, we're gonna get through another day, or another week or another month or another year. But you accept things that have happened. We've had a horrible year of COVID, obviously, advertising is down, we know that. You don't put your tail between your legs right away, you will accept what's happening. ... You accept the fact that every single person, including owners, and anybody in the business is taking a pay cut. You accept that and you continue doing your job, like you are supposed to.” – Sandra

While I commend Sandra for her commitment to the job, this attitude does raise problematic notions, mainly the fact that journalists were in a position to be taken advantage of and some were absolutely put in an unreasonable position during the pandemic. Sandra's loyalty to her company may work for her, but it is important to note that this is not necessarily a healthy stance to take. If anything, the pandemic made it clear to many workers that companies were more interested in saving profits over employees and were willing to put employees in harm's way if it meant continued operations.

Journalists did not stop working during the pandemic. Their role in conveying information was critical, and I expected to hear this from participants. A prominent theme was the difficulty that some participants had in balancing work and life and adjusting to a new way of approaching work. Some journalists were able to work from home, which presented both positive and negative feelings. Negatively, it is apparent that work-life balance was impacted. A feeling of consistently being "at work" was common amongst participants. The move to remote working, for example, impacted Lexi to a point where she says she could not truly "clock out" at the end of the day, while Hannah discussed the need to appear as if things were still normal at her workplace.

"It also makes it hard to clock out at the end of the day, because your laptop is right there. You can close it at 4:30 but I still get emails to my phone ... It's just a part of the job that I'm going to have to adjust to." – Lexi

"It's tough to be able to manage with less people and still be expected to do the same amount of work and to have our listeners need to have no idea. For instance, like the pandemic, our listeners had to have no idea that our three-person newsroom went down to one. That was really tough. But that was what it was." – Hannah

How these respondents were impacted by the pandemic also highlights an important research question around the work-life balance of journalists. Snyder et al. (2021) note that digital technologies in particular can make journalists feel as though there is no separation between work

and personal time, morphing these dual roles into one. Journalists risk burnout, and the nature of day-to-day work in journalism does not mitigate this risk, as detailed in the next section.

Balancing Work and Life

Journalists cover a myriad of stories and topics in their work, some much more distressing and traumatic than others. The nature of journalistic work assumes that reporters are able to cover an array of topics without getting too invested in the issue or story at hand. In rural communities, this is particularly true. Journalists in rural areas are generalists; they often cover every story in their communities, good and bad, since they are the only person in the position to do so. This range of story coverage means that journalists in rural areas must work to ensure they balance the demands of the job with their own health and wellbeing. Terri notes that this is a difficult thing to do at times, but she has been able to set boundaries in her work to ensure she achieves this balance.

“I’ll be honest, I was quite burned out by the time the pandemic rolled around. So, it was actually a very big blessing in disguise for me to be able to take that step back and have a reason to.” – Terri

It is no secret or surprise to hear that the participants in my study worked long hours or took little time off. I suspected this would be a common theme, particularly in rural areas where there is just one media worker. Many participants noted working long days and weeks in their role, but most rationalized this against the flexibility of their work and highlighted their general enjoyment of the work itself.

“I try to take one day a week off, instead of two, I try to at least take one day.” – Sandra

“We’re a small business and we have limited resources. So, the hours in the week get long. I’m not performing brain surgery or anything like that, but the stress is beginning the week, you’ve got 16, 20, 24 blank pages that you have to fill. In order to do that, you have to go get the stuff, so it’s meant there are weeks when I’m working every night, probably working

on the weekends too, for stretches. It could be six and a half days a week you're working.”
 – Frank

Journalists are in a difficult position in their work, with multiple deadlines and expectations that may not allow them to achieve an ideal work-life balance while in their roles. There are adaptations that the respondents have had to make, as well as some concessions.

When speaking with Simon, he brought up an important topic that no one else did: salaries. It is well-known in the industry that journalism does not pay well, particularly in areas that are outside of major urban centres. Data from Glassdoor finds that the average salary for a journalist is about \$54,000, however, salaries can range from \$33,000-\$88,000 (Glassdoor, 2022). A quick scan of jobs shows positions with Postmedia that pay \$36,000 along with positions with the CBC that pay \$84,000, as well as hourly wages ranging from \$16 for internships up to \$34 for contractors (Glassdoor, 2022). Rural areas would likely be at the low end of the salary range, as companies dedicate less resources to weekly publications, and it is generally easier to live off of a lower wage in rural communities. A common saying among media workers is that they do not get into the field for money—rather it is the opposite, they get into journalism because they love the work they do. Simon articulates this struggle and the ramifications of it in a sobering way that highlights the inner battle that he faces between his career and his livelihood.

“I think the biggest challenge for me is the salary to be honest. When I was hired on here, they made it very clear before I accepted the position that there would be no annual raise, and that I saw coming from a mile away. I fully respected that, I fully accepted it. But seven years on after not one single raise, it does kind of start to undermine and erode the motivation and passion that a person brings with them. ... It almost gets to the point where it feels like you're subsidizing the retirements of those above you. ... I think for me, that's the biggest hurdle really, is just wondering, am I going to reach 70K or 80K and be on my deathbed with a laptop, still trying to file one last story before I kick the bucket, still in debt? ... And then at the same time, I'm being told to support your local businesses. I'm like, well, I'd love to, but it's hard to go to the restaurant when I haven't had a raise in seven years.” – Simon

I can sympathize with what Simon says. The low salaries combined with the heavy workload in journalism likely impacts the longevity of many careers (see: Reinardy, 2009). Being a journalist means being in a precarious role, and it seems that many journalists are over-educated and underpaid in their work, highlighting significant shortcomings in the field (Reid & Ghaedipour, 2021). On the macro-level, some of these issues are likely aggravated by the significant decline in revenue that news organizations faced, due in part to lagging advertising sales.

Advertising

Another impact of the pandemic was the virtual stoppage of business. This meant that businesses that advertised with their local media outlet likely pulled their ads in an attempt to save money. Advertising is one of the largest sources of revenue for media, particularly (rural) newspapers. Advertising revenues have been in steep decline since the advent of Facebook and Google, as many businesses no longer see a need to advertise with their media outlet, a finding that corroborates with Lindgren et al.'s (2019) study. Respondents noted this exact challenge, with Carol in particular voicing her concerns around advertising revenue.

“I’m in a community where businesses think they don’t need to advertise. I’ve held off for 30 years to going out of town for advertising. And now I’m being forced into it, I’m being forced to bring competition to my businesses, and it kills me, I’m going to be honest with you, kills me. But I don’t have a choice. So, hopefully, they’ll understand it. That’s all I can hope for.” – Carol

The respondents clearly want to support their communities and want to see this support reciprocated. This reveals a difficult position that media outlets have been put in—needing support from businesses in a way that is difficult to get in the digital age.

The Future of Journalism

Respondents were asked to describe what being a journalist meant to them, and many responded positively to their work and professional duties. This is an unsurprising finding, as it has been made clear that these participants genuinely enjoy the role they are in, despite several noted challenges. Above all, importance is placed on the storytelling aspect of journalism and the level of dedication needed in the role.

“I like journalism. I'm at that point now where this is kind of what I want to do. I like being able to be a storyteller, I like to write and to use creativity to express other people's passions, or things that are happening within a municipality.” – Stan

Survival is top of mind for Frank, and Carol, as they ponder the future of their publications and careers. Frank and Carol own and operate their publication, which means an added responsibility on ensuring the future and longevity of their organization after they leave. Newspapers continue to decline in Canada, and the participants acknowledge the bleak future ahead of them. However, they felt comfortable in the present, instead noting that these concerns will come up in the future, when there may be another solution available for them. Carol and Frank are happy in their individual roles, but the uncertainty of the future of their organization will evidently weigh on them as they move closer toward retirement.

“So, it is a big question, what will happen to [our newspaper]? I haven't set a date. I'm 62, I haven't said I'm retiring at 65 or whenever. I probably will keep doing this as long as I'm interested and able. You get older and you start to wear down a little bit and your skills start to fade. I don't really want to be in that position, but we'll see what happens.” – Frank

“My son does not want to take over the paper. He's willing to work for me, but he doesn't want to take over as editor or publisher or anything like that. That's okay, that's okay with me. But once I retire, if I don't find someone to take over the paper, I would imagine it's going to close. But I'm only 53, so I got some time, at least another 10 years before I have to worry about it.” – Carol

On a continuation from what Frank and Carol discuss for the future of their organization, they understand the potential outcomes for their publication, which could be closure. While this would not be out of the ordinary for newspapers, it is a disappointing finding that highlights the concerns that Lindgren et al. (2019) outline in their work on local news and its rapid disappearance. In order for these community publications to continue their existence, there likely needs to be a dramatic structural shift in order to preserve the organization and ensure continued longevity.

“I'm afraid for my future. I'll be honest, I'm afraid for the future of my industry. Will I still be printing a paper in 10 years? I don't know. The Toronto Star is always going to be around, the Winnipeg Free Press is always going to be around, [my publication]? Probably not.” – Carol

Overall, the respondents come back to affirm their love of their community and how it influences their professional role. Service to the community is a significant theme in this study and highlights how professional roles and identities are constructed against this backdrop. Rural areas are unique in their social makeup, norms, and values, and it is evident that these journalists have been able to carve an identity that aligns closely with their community and with traditional values of journalism.

“I love rural, I love rural writing. But it's a community newspaper. It is the backbone of journalism. There's your quote.” – Sandra

The importance of community in the work of these journalists cannot be overstated. While a number of common themes were discussed, it is also worthwhile to note some of the unique findings from this study, which emphasize the diversity in the views of the participants and the ways in which they have built their own professional identities. This work is an important start when it comes to understanding rural journalism, but more work needs to be done to adequately understand how this impacts rural communities and the industry as a whole. In the next section, I discuss some of the limitations to this study and outline the potential avenues for future research into rural journalism practices.

Discussion

This section analyzes the findings from this project and situates them within the relevant literature. First, I analyze the journalists' discussions on objectivity in their work and how their conceptions of objectivity actually tend to be negated with their sentiments toward their community, and instead argue that objectivity ought to be seen as a continuum versus a strict binary. Particularly in rural journalism, I point to my findings that the participant's express adherence to objective practices, while also engaging in non-objective behaviour when it comes to engaging with their communities. I also focus on the journalists' forms of meaning-making in their work and how their relationships with sources and audiences illustrate the strategies of impression management, face-to-face interaction, and frontstage and backstage behaviours. This finding illuminates the extensive practices that journalists in rural areas engage in in order to create connections with communities and find success in their roles as professionals.

Objectivity

The notion of objectivity has long been heralded as one of the most important pursuits in journalistic work and the findings from my study highlight just that. However, it is crucial to interrogate traditional understandings of objectivity and discuss how the participants take these notions of objectivity and mold them into their unique interpretations, thus challenging traditional narratives of journalism and creating a community-orientated paradigm that fulfills their own professional values. As outlined earlier, journalism as a field is highly subjective and involves a significant amount of meaning-making and social construction, primarily done by the actors within the journalism field. Carlson (2016) sees journalism as its own form of knowledge production, while Callison and Young (2019) emphasize that journalism is rife with uneven power relations and overbearing whiteness. How objectivity is framed and utilized in various applications

highlights its deeply subjective nature—one person’s “truth” is different from another’s, leading us to epistemological questions on the nature of knowledge production and the (false) development of an unquestionable truth. In the journalism field, objectivity is meant to serve as a standard of production, where objectivity is interpreted to mean that the piece of journalistic work is factual and free from obvious bias. However, more nuanced understandings of objectivity question the purpose the practice serves in journalism, particularly when we think about how “objective” reporting reinforces unequal power relations and privileges dominant discourses to the disadvantage of the “other”. For example, Mattar (2020) highlights in their work that police are often treated as truthful sources when in reality, police are “characters” in the stories they create and are not “objective observers of things”. Canella (2021) questions for whom does journalistic objectivity serve, utilizing a theory dubbed “journalistic power” that centres on the cultural production of journalism and posits the idea that journalism is not neutral and journalistic practices are deeply influenced by socioeconomic and historical contexts (p. 3). This notion that so-called neutrality is indeed not neutral serves to challenge dominant western epistemologies surrounding the production of knowledge and who gets to disseminate it. As noted in a later section, the media industry in Canada is overwhelmingly white, and it is fair to say that this significantly influences how news is produced in white, settler colonial contexts (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2021).

I was surprised by the heightened importance that many of the journalists in this study gave to traditional notions of objectivity, and that only one respondent, Lexi, directly challenges these notions. Upon closer inspection of the data and through coding, I was able to find that the participants instead followed their own interpretations of objectivity, which for many of these journalists placed an emphasis on community relationships. This leads me to believe that these

journalists consider the pursuit of objectivity as a “strategic ritual”, as Tuchman (1972) notes, which is a set of professional practices that journalists use to “claim” objectivity without actually being objective, which as discussed earlier, is not truly an achievable goal. It is clear that these journalists engage in a set of practices when it comes to creating their stories and refining their journalistic practice, but they are also based on strong feelings for their communities and there is an explicit dedication to cultivating solid relationships with community members through actions such as empathy and trust. Again, these are not neutral concepts, and the actions described by these journalists do not fall within the traditional understandings of objectivity that they believe they have. Rather, these journalists are explicit about being accountable to their community, while also noting that they are dedicated to their community, and as Carol put it, willing to defend their community “no matter what”. These sentiments, while valid, present tensions with the journalists’ existing understandings of objectivity and its role in their practice. It is clear that objectivity in this case more aligns with strategic rituals, as Tuchman (1972) suggests, but there is likely a gendered and racial component to these understandings as well. This study did not include any racialized journalists, but it is important to note that racialized journalists are often highly scrutinized and seen as too subjective in their work, particularly when it comes to writing about race or other related topics (Matter, 2020). In terms of gender, these noted tensions may be similar, where women and non-binary journalists are typically held to higher standards than male journalists (Canella, 2021).

Overall, while objectivity is an important part of the journalist’s work and professional practice, I argue that we ought to reconsider whether objectivity is truly an achievable ideal or whether it is simply a set of rituals and practices that journalists use to claim objectivity, as Tuchman (1972) argues. In this study in particular, the use of objectivity is molded to fit into the

journalists' own assumptions and beliefs, indicating that objectivity is better understood as a continuum of practices rather than a strict fact/not fact binary. I suspect this might be heightened due to the rural setting of these journalists, but this finding presents an opportunity for additional research. Utilizing this point of view illuminates the level of community dedication these journalists have in their professional practice, and also significantly relates to how these journalists create meaning in their professional roles through symbolic interactions, impression management, and performances.

Dramaturgy and Symbolic Interactionism

Enacting objective behaviours is a technique of journalistic impression management on behalf of the participant, as it is clear in my findings that impression management techniques play a significant role in the construction of professional identities in rural journalists. These behaviours contribute to the larger meaning-making behaviour noted in this study. In this section, I highlight the relationships the journalists have with their sources and their audiences and the parallels to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory on frontstage and backstage behaviour. I then explore the intersections of gender and impression management and highlight the gendered nature of giving off impressions. Lastly, I touch on larger issues that participants noted, such as declining trust in media, and theorize how this impacts the dynamics of impression management in the participant's professional roles.

As Aldridge and Evetts (2003) note, journalism is reflexive work; the values, norms, and structures associated with the field are typically created and reinforced by members of the field itself, complicating the notion of objectivity and its use in journalistic work. If journalists are the ones who create meaning in their work, it can be difficult to claim true objectivity in the product resulting from this labour. But, if we reframe how objectivity is more a set of strategic practices

employed by journalists to achieve their own perception of objectivity, as Tuchman (1972) suggests, we begin to understand how the mythical beast of objective reporting came to fruition. These practices are given meaning through sets of interactions that became embedded in traditional understandings of journalistic work. This meaning is not truly neutral or objective, nor should it be. The focus of journalism, particularly for the participants in this study, is to communicate with their audiences and tell important and interesting stories; and this is a process imbued with meaning and bias, explicit and unconscious. This next section focuses on the meaning(s) created by the journalists in their day-to-day work and explores how this overall contributes to the building of their professional identities and roles.

Building Trust and Empathy

Two of the most significant professional values that the participants claimed were characteristic of journalists were trust and empathy, both of which rely heavily on face-to-face interactions and behaviour in order to be accomplished by the journalists. Goffman (1967), in a discussion on individual traits and their influence on symbolic acts, finds a “rule of conduct” guiding behaviour, most notably with “obligations” and “expectations” (pp. 48-49). Goffman’s (1967) note on obligations highlights a key finding in this study, as many of the participants made note of feeling a “moral obligation” to their role and their audience, thus providing their own rule of conduct, and subsequently shaping their behaviour during interactions. We see this most prominently with the deliberate and explicit intentions on the part of the journalists to build trust and empathy when building relationships with others. Building trust with sources, audiences, and other journalists is a highly subjective and personal endeavour, one that requires a significant amount of emotional labour to do (Hochschild, 1983). Rural journalists noted that the building of trust through micro-levels of interaction is key to building relationships with both sources and

audiences. However, for Goffman (1959), the process of building trust with others is a performance in and of itself. He notes that when individuals are playing a part for their performance of impression management, they may perform “for the benefit of other people”, something that accurately describes the steps taken by the participants when it comes to building trust with others (p. 17). In this study, we see this practice exemplified by the deliberate building of relationships with sources and audiences. For example, Hannah’s statement on trying to be a good representative for her station so that others will see her as trustworthy and professional showcases her performance of building trust. Another example is Carol’s strict adherence to confidentiality as a way of performing trust for others. This form of impression management is crucial for the journalists’ professional reputations and identities in this study and highlights the importance of meaning-making in the nature of journalistic work. Another value is empathy, which again requires a significant amount of impression management to achieve and exude. Empathy is important in the performance that the journalists enact when they are doing their jobs and seems to make up a considerable amount of frontstage behaviour performed by the journalists themselves. As noted in particular by Rob and Frank, empathy is necessary in instances where personal feelings may push professional obligations aside. By bringing empathy to the frontstage, these journalists are able to create a performance centered around building empathy in professional interactions, highlighting a key tactic in the building of professional values. It is important to point out that empathy is typically not freely given or received in many social interactions, nor should it be a catch-all for impression management tactics for journalists. Pedwell (2014) notes that empathy is seen as an ideal solution to social problems in Western societies, and it typically goes unquestioned in its use, leading to a lack of understanding in how empathy is interpreted in diverse contexts (p. x). Rob

and Frank did not make note of the issues they may experience in building empathy in their work, but they do posit it as an integral skill that is part of their professional identity.

The Merging of the Personal and the Professional

An interesting finding from this study was the general feeling that the participants did not construct a separate professional identity when it came to doing their work, rather, they blended professional expectations and values with their own personal selves. This presents an unexpected dynamic in terms of enacting frontstage and backstage behaviour. Some of the attributes that the participants used to indicate their journalist status were similar across participants, such as Frank and Terri's attention to their clothing or Hannah, Sandra, and Carol's explicit disclosure of their position as a journalist when speaking with sources and audiences. The latter may indicate a "descriptive kinship system" where a large number of acts (of journalism in this case) can be presented through a small number of fronts, a theorized "natural development" in social organization (Goffman, 1959, p. 26). Goffman (1959) suggests that the same social fronts may be used for a number of performances, aligning with some of my findings in discussing professional presentations with the journalists. Because the journalists in this study have a number of professional relationships with diverse sources and audiences, it made logical sense for them to have a singular professional appearance. The professional appearance by the journalists incorporates a noteworthy amount of personal affectation in order to cultivate relationships and appear friendly and "personable" towards others. Goffman (1959) notes that some individuals "invest their egos" in specific routines and performances in social spheres, while acting more modestly elsewhere (p. 33). Along this line of acting, Goffman (1959) claims this is done in regard to performances related to occupational reputation, as illustrated by my findings from this study—the existence of primarily professional performances intertwined with a more modest and covert

personal performance, tactfully done so that it still presents an act, but one that is molded to be more informal in nature. Something I attribute to this blending is also the deliberate mixing of the professional and the personal spheres noted in my findings. It is clear that the journalists in this study have a great deal of dedication to their work, with Frank in particular calling it a “lifestyle”, highlighting the personal that is present in the professional, but only to a certain extent where it still serves the journalist professionally, similar to what O’Brien (2003) finds in their study.

Role Strain and Social Media

One question this finding raises is how the participants experience role strain in their work, primarily due to this evident blending of the personal and professional. As noted in my findings, I do not believe the participants experienced a significant amount of role strain in their work; I attribute this to the informal approach the journalists take with their professional performances, which centres their role around community in addition to professional norms and values. This observation complicates my own notions and expectations of role strain. It can be posited that perhaps these journalists do not experience role strain due to this deliberate blending of performances, as they have created a unique-to-them performance that contains both professional and personal values, which allows them to constantly be in this role. Again, I point to Frank’s notion of his work being a lifestyle—his words highlight a common theme that illuminates the unique occupational nature of rural journalism in this study. Instead of role strain, I believe Reamer’s (2003) notion of dual relationships is a better descriptor of my findings, as dual relationships encompass the multiple types of relationships that professionals engage in, whether they are social, religious, sexual, or business (p. 121). When it comes to the journalists’ relationships with sources and audiences, there is evidence of dual relationships in my findings, such as Carol’s relationships with her town’s council, Rob’s relationships with school officials, or

Frank's relationships with sports coaches. In rural communities, sources and audiences significantly overlap due to the variety of stories that rural community reporters write and the small population sizes that these communities typically have. Presenting a professional self through performance is important for navigating these dual relationships. Terri, Sandra, Lexi, and Hannah in particular highlight this sentiment, illustrating some of the impression management tactics used by the participants of this study.

Relating back to impression management, one finding from this study that I found particularly interesting is the extent to which social media impacts the work of the journalists and their own professional practices. Nearly every respondent had something negative to say related to social media and its impact on trust in their work and overall trust in the media as an institution. Notably, the older participants in the study were more distrustful of social media and had more negative feelings towards digital platforms, citing a lack of control over the content shared and significant instances of misinformation being shared. This impacted the way these journalists engage in impression management related to online spheres, which seem to involve a hands-off approach due to the extreme polarization noted by the participants and the additional labour required for them to engage in this type of impression management. Rather than perform individual acts of impression management, it appears these journalists preferred to manage the impression of their organization and publication. Some respondents noted feeling defensive over the reputation of their organization and emphasized the credibility of their profession when it comes to engaging online. Goffman's work has been applied to online identities, with Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) finding that individuals engage in front-stage behaviour online by editing facets of their offline self, and a study from Greer and Ferguson (2016) found that for a television news station, front-stage social media posts received more positive engagement than back-stage posts.

Gender and Impression Management

I want to conclude with a finding that warrants more investigation in the future. There appears to be a gendered nature to the impression management and performance expectations based on the findings from this study. In particular, conversations around physical appearances highlighted the gendered nature of professional role expectations; for example, Sandra, who says she wore shorts during a summer day at the rodeo grounds, was chastised by an anonymous community member for not looking “professional” enough. This highlights both the significant gender expectations placed on women in the workplace and deliberate frontstage performances that the journalists must engage in to be perceived as working professionals. Another example of this in my findings is Terri’s discussion on her impression management techniques, as she says she does not dress in a stereotypically feminine style in her work, as it makes her less “approachable” and “appropriate” for her audience, opting instead to wear “country-esque” clothing in order to be “presentable” to others. This aligns with what Guadagno and Cialdini (2007) find in their work on gendered impression management tactics, noting that impression management techniques that align with traditional feminine role expectations are typically not helpful for the career objectives of women. The expectation of being personable and approachable was voiced by the female journalists, highlighting the gendered nature of impression management work, as women are typically expected to perform emotional labour in order to be presentable and friendly towards others. More work in this area is needed, particularly because female journalists now outnumber male journalists in the Canadian media industry (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2021).

Conclusion

In this section, I conclude the study by touching on the key findings from this project and discussing how these findings relate to the research questions. I highlight the contributions that this study brings to existing literature and also outline the limitations of this project. I conclude with suggestions on future research in this area. The research questions for this project were:

RQ1: To what extent does the current state of local news organizations in Canada affect the construction of a journalist's identity?

RQ2: What challenges do journalists in rural Albertan communities face and how do they overcome them?

RQ3: How is the identity of a journalist constructed and maintained in small, rural news markets in Alberta?

Key Findings

The goal of this study was to discover how journalists who work in rural communities in Alberta develop their professional identities, and what, if any, professional challenges they faced in their roles. In order to get these findings, I utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews and spoke with the nine participants of my study at length about their professional backgrounds, their time in their communities, and their perspectives on the journalism field in Canada. I approached this study with a symbolic interactionist lens, theorizing that journalists who work in rural areas utilize tactics such as impression management to set boundaries in their professional and personal lives. I hypothesize this level of impression management is unique to rural journalists due to the close-knit nature of rural communities, where local journalists are likely more well-known and have a heightened public presence in these communities. I also theorized that journalists may engage in both “frontstage” and “backstage” interactions as a way of building and displaying their

professional identities, while also allowing them space to express their personal identities (Goffman, 1959).

These journalists primarily felt there was no separation between the presentation of their professional selves versus their personal selves, with many respondents noting that they did not act differently when it comes to being a journalist in their rural community. There were several noted instances amongst the participants of impression management techniques, such as expression through clothing, but others claimed they felt no need to present themselves differently. This finding aligns with what Smith (2019) noted in their study, which found that personal and professional identities of journalists were deeply entwined, and the journalists' connections to their communities helped create meaning and significance in their jobs and in the work that they put out to their communities. It also notes that while the journalists in their study did report having multiple identities, such as reporter, parent, club member, etc., these roles helped contribute to an understanding of their own professional roles and duties (Smith, 2019, p. 532). An important note to add is that many of the respondents were from small communities, with nearly half of the respondents working in or near the same community in which they grew up.

There was a noted obligation that participants felt when it came to both their professional duties and their responsibility to their communities. The journalists overwhelmingly adhered to traditional tenets of journalism, such as objectivity, balance in stories, and overall "fairness" while conducting their work. However, when it came to writing about their communities, most of the respondents were deeply invested in building relationships with sources and audiences and wanted to write positively on their communities. This presents a contrast against their previous statements related to journalistic objectivity, but I argue that the participants engage in "strategic rituals" that allow them to claim objectivity, such as making their work appear balanced, yet it is clear that they

hold significant personal and professional biases when it comes to writing about their communities (Tuchman, 1972). These biases appear to be disguised as obligations, particularly in the case of Carol, who notes an obligation to her community. It is not so much that these journalists are wrong, rather it is a reconsideration of what objectivity means to them and how they feel they are able to claim objectivity while still being loyal to their communities. Again, this finding significantly aligns with what Smith (2019) identified, and notes that the ties to their communities help journalists determine what becomes news and in what ways it gets presented to the community (p. 533). The journalists in this study are cheerleaders for their community; their success reflects the success of their communities, and they see their role in these areas as vital to their fellow community members.

There was lengthy discussion with each participant on their views of the field of journalism itself, with many participants expressing frustration with several notable challenges. Social media was a significant challenge for many of the respondents, who voiced their distrust with the platform and noted its impact on their work—for example, audiences who feel entitled to free content from the journalist, or audiences who claim that the work the journalists put out is not legitimate or accurate. Another challenge was the long-term sustainability of both the journalists' careers and organizations. Most respondents struggled with their work-life balance in a way, whether it was working long hours, not being paid enough for their work, or never truly feeling like they were “off-duty”. In addition to this stress, the journalists were concerned about the future of their organization, especially considering declining revenues from advertising and lower publication sales and readership levels. Two of the participants I spoke with owned and operated their media organization, and both were fearful of the future of their publications amid a period of significant transition and change in the journalism industry in Canada. Lastly, I spoke with each participant

on how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their work. There were noted setbacks related to the pandemic, as some respondents had to take on extra work due to a lack of staff in their organizations, while several others were able to find some benefits of pandemic-related professional adaptations. For example, council meetings for their towns, counties, and school boards were moved online as a result of health restrictions, and many journalists expressed satisfaction with this move, as it allowed them more time and flexibility to cover these meetings.

A notable finding from this section of analysis is the notion that the journalists in this study work extremely hard, perhaps to a point of overwork. The journalists' commitment to their jobs, to their communities, and to their professional practice is immense, and quite demanding. It is clear that there are difficulties in work-life balance for these participants, but despite this, they still overwhelmingly express strong sentiments of attachment to their careers. It appears that Deuze's (2005) notion of occupational ideology indeed acts as the social cement that holds together the identity of journalists and the field of journalism.

Contributions to the Literature

This study is unique in its scope in a number of ways, most notably with the locality of the participants, the in-depth nature of the study, and the significant focus on the writers of news and not the news itself. There are significant findings to be discovered when we turn our focus to the journalists themselves. Media workers are not a homogenous group, yet many subscribe to a homogenous set of values and norms in their roles. The purpose of this study was to interrogate this supposed homogeneity and uncover whether there were unique adaptations or ways of conducting their work. My findings highlight an interesting approach to professional duties that I theorize comes about because of the subject's location in rural communities, another aspect of this study that sets it apart. Living and working in close-knit, rural communities presents a unique

challenge for individuals that I believe is magnified in journalists, who occupy very public-facing spaces. The findings from this study show unique adaptations made by these journalists in their work through distinctive interpretations of objectivity and its function, impression management tactics, and the navigation of dual relationships. In a time of significant change in traditional media landscapes, this study illustrates the impact of these changes and reinforces the important and necessary role of local news in democratic societies. The findings from this study explicitly highlight the importance of local news ecosystems and provides testimonials directly from local journalists on the impact that things like newsroom closures, media conglomerations, and budget cuts have had on small newsrooms. It is important to understand that when a community loses its source of news, there is a significant gap that will likely never be filled again, resulting in a substantial loss of accountability and information-sharing practices in rural communities. This is why this research matters. This study is a timely addition to existing literature on the challenges faced by journalists in local publications, with additional exploration and focus on the journalists themselves, highlighting how professional identities are built through unique community dynamics and social locations and emphasizing the importance of preserving local news economies.

Limitations

This project focuses on the journalistic practices of white rural journalists. This is reflective of the significant apparent lack of diversity in rural Albertan newsrooms, which is also reflected in the larger media landscape of Canada (see: Canadian Association of Journalists, 2021; Miller, 2021; Kwak, 2020; and Malik & Fatah, 2019, for timely analyses of the whiteness of Canadian media). During the recruitment process, and based on online research, I was able to identify less than five racialized rural journalists that satisfied my recruitment requirements. While recruiting,

I attempted to personally reach out to as many rural journalists as I could and took care in my messages to highlight the importance of this project and the potential findings it may create. Despite this, I only had a response rate of about 11%, and no racialized journalist indicated that they wanted to be involved in the project. The lack of representation in this study is not unique nor is it completely unexpected. Journalism has long been seen as a white, heteropatriarchal profession, one that is rife with nepotism and meritocratic beliefs. Particularly in Canada, journalism is overwhelmingly white, and the journalistic work in this country is primarily coming from a settler colonial point of view. However, the true extent of the whiteness in Canadian media was practically a mystery, as there had been no significant study on newsroom diversity until the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) (2021) undertook the largest race and gender-based survey of media between 2020 and 2021. Overall, CAJ (2021) finds that nearly half of all Canadian newsrooms “exclusively employ white journalists”, and Black, Indigenous, and other racialized journalists tend to only be concentrated in large newsrooms (p. 6). Around eight out of ten newsrooms have no Black or Indigenous journalists, while about nine out of ten do not employ any Latin, Middle Eastern, or mixed-race journalists (CAJ, 2021, p. 6). CAJ (2021) also notes that 84% of newsrooms do not employ Indigenous journalists, finding that the majority of racialized journalists only work in a small number of newsrooms, typically at larger outlets (p. 6). The findings from the CAJ’s survey confirms a long-rumoured belief that media in Canada is staggeringly white and overwhelmingly privileges white journalists over any other group. 209 media outlets in Canada took part in the survey, out of an invited 636 outlets, and the survey was able to collect race-based data on 2,908 journalists (CAJ, 2021). While impressive, it is important to acknowledge that there is still a lot of unknowns when it comes to diversity in journalism, as CAJ reports that the outlets that did not respond were some of the country’s largest, such as CBC

and Postmedia, leading to significant data gaps (2021). Little to no media outlets in rural communities responded to this survey, so it is difficult to infer what the racial makeup of rural journalists is but considering that racialized journalists tend to be concentrated in (large, urban) newsrooms, it is to be expected that rural newsrooms may be especially overrepresented by white journalists. The whiteness of the respondents and the whiteness of these rural communities is an underlying reality that needs to be more thoroughly examined in future research. Further research on the topic should focus more intently on including racialized journalists, though this research may need to be expanded to larger media outlets and urban centres.

My sample was also fairly homogenous in regard to gender identity and presentation, sexuality, mental health status, neurodivergence, and parental status. Every participant identified as male or female at the time of my interview, so there is a lack of non-binary representation in my sample. Compared to the CAJ survey (2021), nearly 5% of their sample identified as non-binary or unknown. One participant mentioned that they were bisexual but noted that this did not impact their work. Another participant said they have depression, which they note does interfere with their work, while another participant indicated that they had a sleep disorder that impacted how they schedule their free time. Lastly, two participants made specific mention of the fact that they were parents, and this had significance to them as a media worker. There are no specific statistics on LGBTQ+ journalists in Canada, so it is difficult to know if my sample was representative, nor is there data that exists on neurodivergence in journalists or journalists who are also parents.

While this study analyzes the micro-level actions and feelings of journalists, there needs to be important considerations given to the larger, macro-level structures and societies that journalism exists and operates within. Many conceptualizations of journalist roles and identities are developed

from a Western, settler colonial, white, patriarchal understanding of journalism culture and my own study furthers this understanding, perhaps problematically (Hanitzsch, 2007). In Canada, there are several media organizations dedicated to disrupting existing hegemonic media structures, such as the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), or The Tyee, however, these organizations are not based in rural communities, at least not on a day-to-day or permanent basis. This study predominantly highlights the perspectives of journalists working within these hegemonic institutions, and it is important to address some of the shortcomings with this study related to diverse and non-dominant and non-traditional forms of journalism.

Future Research

There are several exciting and noteworthy avenues that this research can take in the future. Primarily, my hope is that this study is able to be replicated for other rural areas, particularly in rural Indigenous communities and/or in more northern outlets, where communities are more close-knit due to the remote and communal nature of these areas. More research in other communities would allow me to more deeply explore issues related to identity development and professional role construction in rural media workers. A path that I am particularly interested in taking this research in the future is through oral history work. Journalism and oral history are deeply inter-related, like “kissing cousins” as Mark Feldstein (2004) notes, with each approach bringing unique depth and nuance to work. I would like use oral history methods to interview journalists about their own life histories, while also gathering information on the histories of their publications. There appears to be a significant lack of work in this area, with most research on oral history and journalism focusing on professional methods and comparisons, and the use of oral history as a tool for journalists themselves. Given the length of the interviews I had with the participants in this project, I think utilizing oral history methods to better understand the careers of rural journalists

can present unique and valuable work in the future. Lastly, I would like to see a similar study like this replicated with a more diverse group of participants, to really understand some of the exceptional challenges that marginalized journalists may face in addition to their professional responsibilities. There is an obvious lack of racialized journalists in rural newsrooms, so significant care and work will have to be done in this area to be able to create substantial and meaningful research for this.

Final Thoughts

I have had a vision for this study since my second year as an undergraduate, while I was in a sociology class on research methodologies. While there have been several complications to executing this vision, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and general fatigue and burnout, I am immensely proud of this project and the findings shared with me by the rural journalists that I interviewed. I conducted this research as an insider and attempted to address my insider status through reflexivity, transparency, and disclosure. From the researcher's perspective, my insider's status was valuable, as it provided me with a level of background knowledge and insight to engage in extensive conversations about journalism with the participants, allowing me to establish rapport and present myself as a co-creator of knowledge along with the participant. I had only known what my experience as a rural journalist was like, and through this study, I have gained a renewed passion for rural journalism. While it seems that my own experience is not substantially similar to most of the participant's experiences, there are certain facets of my findings that I deeply relate to, such as the (lack of) work-life balance and the passion for storytelling. This project reaffirms for me the importance of local news in rural areas and my hope is that the dissemination of these results illuminates that for a wider audience. I look forward to the next stage of this project and continuing this important work now and in the future.

References

- Adams, C. (2012). (Writing myself into) Betty White's stories: (De)constructing narratives of/through feminist sport history research. *Journal of Sport History*, 39(3), 395-413.
- Albæk, E., van Dalen, A., Jebril, N., and de Vreese, C. H. (2014). *Political Journalism in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aldridge, M., & Evetts, J. (2003). Rethinking the concept of professionalism: The case of journalism. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(4), 547-564.
- Ali, C., and Radcliffe, D. (2017). Small-market newspapers in the digital age. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/local-small-market-newspapers-study.php.
- Ali, C., Schmidt, T. R., Radcliffe, D., and Donald, R. (2018). The digital life of small market newspapers. *Digital Journalism*, 7(7), 886-909.
- Bakker, P. (2014). Mr. Gates Returns. *Journalism Studies*, 15(5), 596-606.
- Berkowitz, D., and TerKeurst, J. V. (1999). Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship. *Journal of Communication*, 49(3), 125-136.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bowd, K. (2004). Interviewing the interviewers: Methodological considerations in gathering data from journalists. *Australian Journalism Review*, 26(2), 115-123.
- Brake, J. (2021). "Built on a foundation of white supremacy". *Briarpatch Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/built-on-a-foundation-of-white-supremacy>.
- Broersma, M., and Singer, J. B. (2021). Caught between innovation and tradition: Young journalists as normative change agents in the journalistic field. *Journalism Practice*, 15(6), 821-838.
- Bullingham, L., & Vasconcelos, A. C. (2013). 'The presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities. *Journal of information science*, 39(1), 101-112.
- Callison, C., and Young, M. L. (2019). *Reckoning: Journalism's limits and possibilities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Canadian Association of Journalists. (2011). *Ethics guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://caj.ca/ethics-guidelines>.

- Canadian Association of Journalists. (2021). *Canadian newsroom diversity survey*. Retrieved from <https://caj.ca/diversitysurveyresults>.
- Canella, G. (2021). Journalistic power: Constructing the “truth”, and the economics of objectivity. *Journalism Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1914708>.
- Carlson, M. (2016). Metajournalistic discourse and the meanings of journalism: Definitional control, boundary work, and legitimation. *Communication Theory*, 26, 349-368.
- Casey, M. (March 6, 2019). Journalists can’t hold government officials accountable as news deserts rise. *Chicago Sun Times*. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/3/6/18414499/journalists-can-t-hold-government-officials-accountable-as-news-deserts-rise>.
- Chalfant, H. P., & Heller, P. L. (1991). Rural/Urban versus Regional Differences in Religiosity. *Review of Religious Research*, 33(1), 76–86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3511262>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Cronlund Anderson, M., and Robertson, C. L. (2011). *Seeing red: A history of Natives in Canadian newspapers*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Crowden, A. (2010). Virtue ethics and rural professional healthcare roles. *Rural Society*, 20(1), 64-75.
- Davidson, R., & Meyers, O. (2016). Toward a typology of journalism careers: Conceptualizing Israeli journalists' occupational trajectories. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 9(2), 193-211.
- Dean, W. (2021). Journalism Essentials. *American Press Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/>.
- Deuze, M. (2005). What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464.
- Doucet, A. (2007). “From her side of the Gossamer wall(s)”: Reflexivity and relational knowing. *Qual Sociol*, 31, 73-87.
- Feldstein, M. (2004). Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History. *The Oral History Review*, 31(1), 1–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675528>
- Gans, H. J. (2018). Sociology and Journalism: A Comparative Analysis. *Contemporary Sociology*, 47(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306117744794>.
- Gill, I. (2016). No news is bad news: Canada’s media collapse and what comes next. Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Glassdoor. (March 27, 2022). Journalist Salaries. Retrieved from https://www.glassdoor.ca/Salaries/journalist-salary-SRCH_KO0,10.htm

- Glogger, I. (2019). Soft spot for soft news? Influences of journalistic role conceptions on hard and soft news coverage. *Journalism Studies*, 20(16), 2293-2311.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviour*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Government of Alberta. (2016). List of urban and rural communities [Dataset]. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/899c9cca-8ce7-40d2-8d2d-c9c369884d9a/resource/035d1e0d-595b-43aa-8d57-d7e3f7e11625/download/listofurbanandruralcommunitiesinalberta.pdf>.
- Greene, M. J. (2014). On the inside looking in: Methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(29), 1-13.
- Greer, C. F., & Ferguson, D. A. (2016). Local TV station presentation of self on Instagram: Applying Goffman to organizational use of social media. In *Mass Communication Division National Communication Association Annual Convention* (pp. 1-4).
- Greider, T., Krannich, R., & Berry, E. (1991). Local identity, solidarity, and trust in changing rural communities. *Sociological Focus*, 24(4), 263-282.
- Grubenmann, S., and Meckel, M. (2017). Journalists' professional identity. *Journalism Studies*, 18(6), 732-748.
- Guadagno, R. E., and Cialdini, R. B. (2007). Gender differences in impression management in organizations: A qualitative review. *Sex Roles*, 56(7), 483-494. DOI:10.1007/s11199-007-9187-3.
- Gurleyen, P., & Hackett, R. A. (2016). Who needs objectivity? Journalism in crisis, journalism for crisis. In M. Gasher et al. (Eds.), *Journalism in crisis: Bridging theory and practice for democratic media strategies in Canada*, (pp. 27-48). University of Toronto Press.
- Gurung, R. A., Brickner, M., Leet, M., & Punke, E. (2018). Dressing "in code": Clothing rules, propriety, and perceptions. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 158(5), 553-557.
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Deconstructing journalism culture: Toward a universal theory. *Communication Theory*, 17, 367-385.
- Hanusch, F. (2015). A different breed altogether? *Journalism Studies*, 16(6), 816-833.
- Hanusch, F., and Hanitzsch, T. (2017). Comparing journalistic cultures across nations. *Journalism Studies*, 18(5), 525-535.
- Harding, R. (2005). The media, Aboriginal people, and common sense. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 25(1), 312-335.

Hatcher, J., and Haavik, E. (2014). We write with our hearts: How community identity shapes Norwegian community journalists' news values. *Journalism Practice*, 8(2), 149-163.

Hellemueller, L., & Mellado, C. (2015). Professional roles and news construction: A media sociology conceptualization of journalists' role conception and performance. *Communication & Society* 28(3), 1- 11.

Henry, F., and Taylor, C. (2000). Racist discourse in Canada's English print media. *The Canadian Race Relations Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/en/resources/research-projects/item/23532-racist-discourse-in-canadas-english-print-media-en-gb-1>.

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Holton, A. E., Lewis, S. C., and Coddington, M. (2016). Interacting with audiences. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), 849-859.

Johnston, G. (2019). The kids are all white: Examining race and representation in news media coverage of opioid overdose deaths in Canada. *Sociological Inquiry*, 90(1), 123-146.

Kavoura, A., & Bitsani, E. (2014). Methodological considerations for qualitative communication research. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 147, 544-549.

Kovach, B., and Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The elements of journalism* [Third Ed.]. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Kwak, A. J. (2020). The colour of Canadian media. *The McGill International Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.mironline.ca/the-colour-of-canadian-media/>.

Lindgren, A., & Corbett, J. (2018). *Local news map data December 1, 2018*. Retrieved from <https://localnewsresearchproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/LocalNewsMapDataasofDecember12018.pdf>.

Lindgren, A., Jolly, B., Sabatini, C., Wong, C. (2019). *Good news, bad news: A snapshot of conditions at small-market newspapers in Canada*. Retrieved from <https://portal.journalism.ryerson.ca/goodnewsbadnews/>.

Lockett, M. (2019). A Duty to Report: Alternative Journalism as Political Obligation to Resist and Remedy Injustice. *PHP Dialogues*, 2(1).

Mattar, P. (2020). Objectivity is a privilege afforded to white journalists. *The Walrus*. Retrieved from <https://thewalrus.ca/objectivity-is-a-privilege-afforded-to-white-journalists/>.

Malik, A., & Fatah, S. (2019). Newsrooms not keeping up with changing demographics, study suggests. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/newsrooms-not-keeping-up-with-changing-demographics-study-suggests-125368>.

- Mellow, M. (2005). The work of rural professionals: Doing the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft gavotte. *Rural Sociology*, 70(1), 50-69.
- Merriam, S. B., Johnson-Bailey, J., Lee, M. Y., Kee, Y., Ntseane, G., & Muhamad, M. (2001). Power and positionality: Negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures. *International journal of lifelong education*, 20(5), 405-416.
- Miller, J. (2006). Who's telling the news? *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations*, 5, 1-13.
- Miller, J. (2021). White newsrooms: History repeats itself. *New Canadian Media*. Retrieved from <https://newcanadianmedia.ca/white-newsrooms-history-repeats-itself/>.
- News Media Canada. (2013). *Community newspaper fact sheet 2014*. Retrieved from <https://nmc-mic.ca/ad-resources/reference/community-newspaper-fact-sheet-2014/>.
- News Media Canada. (n.d.). *Local Journalism Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://nmc-mic.ca/lji/>.
- O'Brien, M. (2003). Covering a community from within. *Quill Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.quillmag.com/2003/05/19/covering-a-community-from-within/>.
- Pedwell, C. (2014). *Affective relations: The transnational politics of empathy*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- PEN America. (2019). *Losing the news: The decimation of local journalism and the search for solutions*. Retrieved from <https://pen.org/local-news/>.
- Postmedia Network Canada Corp. (2021). *Postmedia reports fourth quarter results*. Retrieved from <https://www.postmedia.com/2021/10/21/postmedia-reports-fourth-quarter-results-7/>.
- Reamer, F. G. (2003). Boundary issues in social work: Managing dual relationships. *Social Work*, 48(1), 121-133.
- Reid, J. A., Green, B., Cooper, M., Hastings, W., Lock, G., & White, S. (2010). Regenerating rural social space? Teacher education for rural—regional sustainability. *Australian Journal of Education*, 54(3), 262-276.
- Reid, E., & Ghaedipour, F. (2021). Journalism jobs are precarious, financially insecure and require family support. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/journalism-jobs-are-precarious-financially-insecure-and-require-family-support-157012>.
- Reinardy, S. (2009). Beyond satisfaction: Journalists doubt career intentions as organizational support diminishes and job satisfaction declines. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 17(3), 126-139.
- Rollwagen, H., Shapiro, I., Bonin-Labelle, G., Fitzgerald, L., & Tremblay, L. (2019). Just who do Canadian journalists think they are? Political role conceptions in global and historical

perspective. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 52(3), 461-477.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423919000015>.

Russo, T. C. (1998). Organizational and professional identification: A case of newspaper journalists. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 12(1), 72-111.

Shapiro, I., Brin, C., Bédard-Brûlé, I., & Mychajlowycz, K. (2013). Verification as a strategic ritual: How journalists retrospectively describe processes for ensuring accuracy. *Journalism Practice*, 7(6), 657-673.

Sherwood, M., and O'Donnell, P. (2018). Once a journalist, always a journalist? *Journalism Studies*, 19(7), 1021-1038.

Skelton, C. (2018). There are fewer journalists in Canada than 15 years ago — but not as few as you might think. *J-Source*. Retrieved from <https://j-source.ca/canadian-journalists-statistics/>.

Skinner, D., Gasher, M. J., and Compton, J. (2001). Putting theory to practice. *Journalism*, 2(3), 341-360.

Smith, C. C. (2019). Identity(ies) explored: How journalists' self-conceptions influence small-town news. *Journalism Practice*, 13(5), 524-536.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1544849>.

Snyder, I., Johnson, K., & Kozimor-King, M. L. (2021). Work–life balance in media newsrooms. *Journalism*, 22(8), 2001–2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919841759>

Solomon, D. N., (1970). Role and self conception: Adaptation and change in occupations. In T. Shibutani (ed.) *Human Nature and Collective Behavior: Papers in Honor of Herbert Blumer*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., pp. 286-301.

Statistics Canada. (March 3, 2022). *Table 98-10-0002-02 Population and dwelling counts: Canada, provinces and territories, and census subdivisions (municipalities)* [Data table]. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810000202>.

Statistics Canada. (November 3, 2021a). Newspaper publishers, 2020. *The Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211103/dq211103a-eng.htm>.

Statistics Canada. (May 10, 2021b). Radio broadcasting industry by operating and financial detail. *Table 22-10-0005-01*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=2210000501>.

Stryker, S. (1968). Identity salience and role performance: The relevance of symbolic interaction theory for family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 30(4), 558-564.

Tandoc, E. C., Hellemueller, L., & Vos, T. P. (2013). Mind the gap: Between journalistic role conception and role enactment. *Journalism Practice*, 7(5), 539-554.

Tandoc, E. C., & Peters, J. (2015). One journalist, two roles: What happens when journalists also work as media coordinators? *Journalism*, 16(3), 324-340.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913520199>.

Toronto Star. (2018). Torstar journalistic standards guide. Retrieved from
<https://www.thestar.com/about/statementofprinciples.html>.

Tracy, S. J. (2020). Interview planning and design. In *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* [2nd ed.]. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of sociology*, 77(4), 660-679.

Vos, T. P., Eichholz, M., and Karaliova, T. (2019). Audiences and journalistic capital. *Journalism Studies*, 20(7), 1009-1027.

Waisbord, S. R. (2018). Truth is what happens to news. *Journalism Studies*, 19(13), 1866 - 1878.

Winberg, M. (2015). Newsrooms still ruled by boys' club. *The Temple News*. Retrieved from
<https://temple-news.com/newsrooms-still-ruled-by-boys-club/>.

Woodrow, A., and Reimer, B. (2014). Building capacity: The role of rural traditional media and the new rural economy. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(4), 181-202.

Young, S., and Carson, A. (2018). What is a journalist? *Journalism Studies*, 19(3), 452-472.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Describe your role at your organization and what work you do. Tell me what your work involves.
 - a. What types of stories do you write?
 - b. What have you found to be difficult or struggled with at your job?
 - c. What have you found to be easy at your job?
 - d. “Instructions to the Double” exercise (Tracy, 2020). Ask participant to write instructions to an identical double on how they can do their job should they take their place.
2. Tell me about your background as a journalist.
 - a. How did you come to pursue work in this profession?
 - b. Did you receive any formal education? If so, what, and where?
 - c. Did you work as a journalist elsewhere prior to your current position? Where?
 - d. How did you come to be in your current position?
3. Tell me about your community.
 - a. What community or communities do you write for? Describe them.
 - b. How long have you lived here?
 - c. How do you feel about living in this community?
 - d. When you are doing your work in the community, how do you present yourself to others, such as your interview subjects?
 - e. Do you have different relationships with people in your community as a result of your work?
 - f. If given a choice, would you stay in this community to do your job?
 - g. If given a choice, would you move to another rural community to do your job?
 - h. If given a choice, would you move to an urban centre to do your job?
4. Let’s talk about journalism.
 - a. What qualities or traits do you believe make someone a journalist?
 - b. What does being a journalist mean for you?
 - c. What practices do you engage in to establish to others that you are a journalist?
 - d. How did you learn these practices?
 - e. What role do you believe journalists have in democratic societies?
 - f. What role do you believe you play in your community?
 - g. What obligations do you feel you have to yourself as a result of identifying as a journalist?
 - h. What obligations do you feel you have to your community as a result of identifying as a journalist?
 - i. What obligations do you feel you have to your organization as a result of identifying as a journalist?

5. The state of local news in Canada is experiencing significant changes due to job loss, revenue loss, organizational restructuring, and an increased focus on digital media. I would like to discuss this state of affairs with you.
 - a. How do you perceive the current state of local news in Canada? In Alberta?
 - b. How do you perceive the state of local news in your community?
 - c. Have there been any changes to your role or organization that have affected how you perform at your job?
 - d. Have you experienced any other changes that have altered how you conduct your work?
 - e. Do you feel that your job or role has changed while you have been at your current organization?
 - f. If you have experienced changes, how have you adapted to these?
6. Lastly, I have a few questions about your background:
 - a. Gender identity and pronouns:
 - b. Sexual orientation:
 - c. Race/ethnicity/Indigeneity (as personally reported):
 - d. Disability (as personally reported):
 - e. Anything else that is important in terms of how you self-identify:
7. Is there anything else you feel is important for me to know and to include in my project?
8. What do you feel was most important to discuss during our interview?
9. Do you have any questions for me?