If You Build It, Will They Come?
An Exploratory Study of Community Reactions to an Open Source Media Project in Greensburg, Kansas

Sam C. Mwangi[*], J. Steven Smethers[†] and Bonnie Bressers[‡]

This exploratory study seeks to ascertain whether community engagement behaviors among residents of Kiowa County, Kansas, and their attitudes about the new community information portal affect their intentions to contribute content. Results indicate that while most residents are engaged and have a favorable view of this citizen journalism project, technology-based communication hubs pose unique challenges beyond civic engagement that creators of information hubs should consider.

Greensburg, Kansas, was thrust into the national limelight when an EF5 tornado hit the city on May 4, 2007, killing 12 people, injuring 90 more and destroying 95 percent of the city (Ablah *et al.*, 2007). In the aftermath of the storm, it soon became clear that this small south Central Kansas farming community of approximately 900 people and residents of surrounding areas had vital information needs that could not be met through the existing communication infrastructure (Smethers *et al.*, 2010). The local newspaper, the *Kiowa County Signal,* is a weekly publication and therefore was unable to provide the constant information updates that local residents needed. The paper's website was in no position to fill the void because electricity and the cable system were equally affected. Area radio and television stations located in Wichita, Dodge City and Pratt, Kansas, were too remotely located to provide constant emergency communications essential to the rescue and cleanup efforts. Residents established improvisational communications networks to fill the void including use of cell phones, bulletin boards, interpersonal communication and a daily duplicated paper bulletin called the *Yellow Sheet*.

As rebuilding efforts got underway and area media got back on track, the *Signal* was a model community newspaper, providing residents with extensive information associated with

---

[*] Dr. Sam C. Mwangi is an associate professor at the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Kansas State University.
[†] Dr. J. Steven Smethers is an associate professor at the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Kansas State University.
[‡] Professor Bonnie Bressers is an associate professor at the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Kansas State University

rebuilding efforts. But civic leaders did not forget the frustrations of their inability to communicate with residents in the immediate aftermath of the tornado. With technical advice from Kansas State University, city and county leaders began to explore ways to fill such a void and to get information to citizens in-between the weekly editions of the newspaper (Smethers *et al.*, 2010). An idea gradually emerged that would bring together several information sources and use modern technology to communicate with the public. The centerpiece of this communication hub is the Kiowa County Commons, which was dedicated in November 2011 and houses the Kansas State University Research and Extension office, the county museum, county library, and a state-of-the-art media center that includes a radio and audio production studio, a television studio, and a Web portal to disseminate multimedia content via a WiMAX system installed on the highest point in the community: the local grain elevator (Wilson, 2008).

Though the Media Center was not at full capacity at the beginning of this research project, the facility nonetheless had the capability to offer a myriad of information services, including streaming local government meetings and community news. More importantly, the media center plan embraces "open sourcing" as an ideal that Reader (2012) has pointed out as synonymous with good community journalism practice. Residents in Greensburg were expected to contribute a good portion of the content to the information hub as a way of building the civic vibrancy of the rebuilt city (Watson, 2011). From the beginning, it was understood that the county-owned Media Center would be on its own in terms of collecting and providing local information, as Gatehouse Media, the publisher of the *Kiowa County Signal*, foresaw active partnership as a potential conflict of interest (Smethers *et al.*, 2010). In 2001, the Center's board of directors hired producer/manager Grant Neuhold, who attempted to transform the founders' lofty expectations for the facility into reality. Neuhold began soliciting volunteers, who were initially a handful of local adult volunteers, and a more energetic—and electronic media savvy—group of high school students. He launched a training program that covered basic audio-video production techniques, theorizing that building community participation and promoting buy-in of the open source aspects of the project would likely begin with a nucleus of trained citizens. Neuhold also began providing some local offerings produced by his cadre of citizen journalists, including a limited schedule of Kiowa County High School athletic events (Grant Neuhold, personal communication, January 30, 2013).

Neuhold's ambitious efforts to demonstrate what the Media Center could provide for the community were generally met with enthusiasm, but serious questions remained that affect the operationalization and sustainability of the center's mission: How do local residents view the project, and what are their attitudes about contributing content to the local information network? Although the media center and its goals seemingly serve as a model of the critical connection between communication and civic engagement, there is still the unanswered question of whether residents will use the center's services or contribute content.

The purpose of this study is to examine civic engagement behaviors among residents of Kiowa County, their attitudes towards the new community information portal and their likelihood to contribute content. After a discussion of the literature, the study uses survey methodology to gather information to explore the research questions.

Literature Review

Communication and Civic Engagement

Civic engagement has been defined as a heightened sense of responsibility through which individuals, acting as citizens of their own communities, their nations and the world, are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world (Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership, 2004).

French scholar Pierre Bourdieu is credited with laying the theoretical foundations for the civic engagement movement through his writings on social capital which described circumstances under which individuals could use their membership in groups and networks to secure benefits. Bourdieu (1986) argued:

> Social capital is an attribute of an individual in a social context. One can acquire social capital through purposeful actions and can transform social capital into conventional economic gains. The ability to do so, however, depends on the nature of the social obligations, connections, and networks available to you.

Sociologist James Coleman, who wrote widely on public issues involving schools and families, advanced Bourdieu's ideas by helping bridge the gap between the individualistic market-oriented thinking of economists and the sociologists concerns with social networks, values and norms (Coleman, 1988). He used the term "social capital" to show ways in which social ties and shared values and norms can help people become better educated, amass economic wealth, make careers and raise well-socialized children. He argued that economists should pay attention to social ties and culture (Coleman, 1990).

Political scientist Robert Putnam borrowed some of Coleman's ideas on social capital in his seminal book, *Making Democracy Work*, to explain effective democratic governance in Italy. Putnam found that regional governments in Italy, which looked very similar on paper, worked very differently depending on which region had a rich array of voluntary social groups (Putnam, 1993). In a follow-up book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam used social statistics to argue that the United States has experienced a decline in social capital in the late twentieth century as Americans became less likely to join groups such as churches, bowling alleys or civic organizations. Putnam argued that the problems facing U.S. democracy and governance can actually be traced to the decline in social connections (Putnam, 1995).

Putnam's research has inspired other scholarly works and discussions on social and political change, including studies on social capital that pay tribute to such networks as significant in development of a democratic culture and participation of citizens. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (2003) has compiled a comprehensive list of indicators of civic engagement, which include: voting in national elections, joining a political party, being a candidate for local office, and civic activism, such as writing letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns, collecting signatures for a petition, collecting money for a social cause and boycotting products or services because of social concerns. For citizens to be engaged in civic life, they must be equipped with certain skills such as knowledge and understanding of community issues, values that support a civic culture, a willingness to act to advance the public good, and the skills and ability to imagine a better society and direct social change (Pratte, 1988; Carpini, 2000). Political communication research

has demonstrated that news media consumption and interpersonal political discussion play important roles in civic participation (McLeod *et al.*, 1996; Shah *et al.,* 2001). News media provide a resource for political discussion and create opportunities for exposure to conflicting viewpoints, encouraging political talk that might not otherwise occur (Mutz & Martin, 2001: Mutz, 2002). In turn, political discussion raises awareness about collective problems, highlights opportunities for involvement, and thereby promotes civic participation (McLeod *et al.*, 1999; Kwak *et al.*, 2005).

Citizen journalism adds another layer to civic engagement by creating opportunities for citizens to be involved in the production and distribution of media content. Citizen journalism has been defined as 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9). This study also acknowledges and adopts as its definition and understanding of citizen journalism the *participatory* (Deuze *et al.*, 2007) and *user-centered* (Hermida and Thurman, 2008) nature of this trend. As Rosen (2008) noted: "When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism."

Participatory media technologies that allow the creation and distribution of user-generated content have subverted the traditional power dynamics that separated sender and receiver, thus allowing for multiple discourse through blogs, podcasts, virtual reality (e.g. Second Life), collaborative technology (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites and video sharing sites (Freidman, 2005; Tancer, 2007; Birdsall, 2007). These technological developments as well as a cultural trend that increasingly encourages citizens to produce media content has led to a rising embrace and popularity of citizen journalism (Tapscott and Williams, 2006).

Citizen journalism impacts the democratic process by allowing citizens to be part of a conversation in the public sphere as envisaged in the ideals of Jurgen Habermas (1989) where public deliberation becomes an integral part of democracy and civic engagement. Scholars have argued that communication is essential in the development and sustenance of civic engagement (Dewey, 1927; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). They argue that a community with a communication infrastructure that citizens can use as a storytelling network to share their lived experiences is a stronger community.

Kim and Ball-Rokeach have developed a theoretical framework that differentiates communities in terms of whether they have communication resources that can be activated for common purpose. In developing the communication infrastructure theory, they posit that there are three forms of story telling within communities: macro, meso. and micro storytelling agents. Macro-storytellers refers to the mainstream media which tend to focus on larger populations such as city, state, or a country. Meso-storytelling agents include neighborhood associations and tend to focus on one particular section of a place. Micro-storytelling agents are the individuals who live in a neighborhood. The theory confers significant importance to the meso and micro story tellers. According to Kim and Ball-Rokeach, "when residents talk about their community in neighborhood council meetings, at a neighborhood block party, at the dinner table, or over the fence with neighbors, they become local storytelling agents — participants in an active imaging of their community," (2006a, p. 179). They further argue that while each agent is important, the value of agents is multiplied when they come together to form a storytelling network. "In an ideal community, meso-and microstorytellers form an integrated network where each story teller stimulates the others to talk about the local community (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a, p. 181).

The Kiowa County Media Center has been an effort to provide such an integrated communication network for the community.

Local Media Use and Civic Engagement

Numerous studies have linked local media use with civic engagement and community integration, what Stamm (1985) and other researchers, such as Rothenbuher, Mullen, DeLaurell, and Ryu (1996), have called "community ties." In this sense, media content is seen as a vital component of one's sense of belonging to a particular locale (Janowitz, 1952; Stamm, 1985; Rothenbuhler *et al.*, 1996). Community attachment and local media use do not have a causal impact on one another (Hoffman & Eveland, 2010), but the two concepts do have a strong relationship in the formation of individual civic engagement and the propensity of local individuals to be involved in community issues and events (Stamm, 1985; Rothenbuhler *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, media play a key role in the local interpersonal communications infrastructure, the "neighborhood storytelling network," through which integrated citizens share important information gleaned from media in face-to-face or computer-mediated conversations (cf., Hayden & Ball-Rokeach, 2007; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Mehart, 2008).

Interestingly, while studies linking media content and consumption with community cognition and affection are numerous, few studies have attempted to determine if factors relating to community engagement are predictors of an individual's propensity to actually create news content, a key element in citizen journalism projects. Studies do link such activities as writing letters to the editor with community engagement traits (CIRCLE, 2003), but there is little literature to establish how or if one's attachment to a community translates into the willingness to contribute news and/or visual content to a newspaper or any kind of communications hub. Littau, Thorson and Bentley (2007) attempted to determine if community engagement was a predictor of reader propensity to actually contribute content to a citizen journalism newspaper project. The study was inconclusive on these variables, although the researchers did conclude that an open-source newspaper is a viable medium in the communications infrastructure of community-involved people (p. 21).

Citizen journalism projects have occupied the imagination of both the journalism and academic professions since the development of the concept nearly a decade ago. But studies about citizen journalism sites have primarily focused on the content and goals of such ventures (cf., Lacy, Duffy, Thorson & Fleming, 2010). While content is undoubtedly important, so are the perceptions and attitudes of the audience toward such projects. Citizen journalism is based on what Watson (2011) calls "the active audience" that is engaged, technically savvy and interactive in both consuming and providing content. To ensure the viability of citizen journalism as a community medium, then, we need audience studies that gauge the consumer attitudes and their perceived willingness to participate, especially in small towns and communities such as Greensburg and surrounding Kiowa County, where the media project is based on the assumption of community contributions.

The Kiowa County experiment in providing an electronic citizen journalism hub thus provides a unique lens through which scholars may view an actual audience perspective of an open source project. Such a study was first undertaken by Smethers, Freeland and Rake (2010), who conducted focus groups in Greensburg to ascertain the feelings of county residents toward the perceived benefits of the project. That study sought to determine the propensity of residents to accept an open-source news outlet as a bona fide source of local news, and to determine the

propensity of users to regularly read and contribute information in audio and video formats. Panelists quickly realized the potential of the information portal as a storytelling medium and a community information hub. However, they also forecast that sustaining the project was only possible if the Media Center's staff could conduct regular reporting and production training sessions to teach the skills involved, and panelists' propensity to be active contributors was still mixed, based on how they saw their technical capabilities and how they viewed the journalistic value of possible contributions. The study did not probe the actual community engagement tendencies of the panelists.

This exploratory study seeks to ascertain attitudes of residents about the community information portal in the Kiowa County Media Center in Greensburg. Specifically, the research attempts to ascertain whether behaviors of community engagement may contribute to positive attitudes about the Center and people's intentions to become regular contributors to the content of the computer-mediated information hub.

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: What is the level of community engagement among residents of Kiowa County, Kansas?

RQ2: What are the attitudes of county residents towards the Kiowa County Media Center and citizens' perceptions of the Center's perceived benefits to the community?

RQ3: Beyond the known criteria of individual community engagement, what other factors are unique to the adoption of a computer-mediated communication hub?

Method

In line with Tse's summary (1998) that outlines the multiple advantages of electronic surveys including cost, ease of process and speed, a 32-item online questionnaire containing semantic differential, dichotomous-choice and open-ended items was designed. Following previous studies finding that civically engaged people are active local news consumers (Stamm, 1985; Rothenbuhler *et al.*, 1996), researchers for this study sought to survey individuals who were likely to fit such a description, and in that regard, the subscription list for a local electronic newsletter, the *Yellow Sheet*, proved to be an effective purposive sample. The *Yellow Sheet* was originally designed to provide daily emergency communications in the aftermath of the 2007 tornado. It was a necessity at the time, considering that the *Kiowa County Signal*'s seven-day news cycle was inadequate to meet the community's "24/7" news needs. The e-publication's constant news updates and publication flexibility proved to be so popular that it remains today as an alternative source of local news. While the sample was not random and not without limitations, *Yellow Sheet* subscribers nonetheless represented local business owners and managers in this county of only 2,549 total residents. Despite the age homogeneity—they were all over 30 years old — respondents were nonetheless judged to be knowledgeable about the Media Center and display characteristics of civic engagement.

Questions that sought to examine respondents' levels of community engagement were consistent with Littau, Thorson and Bentley (2007). Other questions involved awareness of the Kiowa County Media Center, attitudes toward it, perceived difficulties in accessing or providing content to the Media Center, possible solutions to those obstacles, and respondents' preferred

news and information subject categories. Demographic questions were also asked. The questionnaire was initially pretested with six individuals who were not part of the targeted sample but were nonetheless familiar with the Media Center project and its mission.

An introductory letter about the project was emailed one week prior to the distribution of the questionnaire. Mindful of Dillman's dictum (1978) that follow-up reminders should be sent one, three and seven weeks after an initial mailing, but also recognizing Andreson and Gansneder's (1995) argument that the faster delivery speed of email requires a different and faster schedule of reminder notices, researchers sent weekly follow-up reminders during the three weeks of the questionnaire's availability.

A total of 36 surveys were completed and returned for a response rate of nearly 21 percent (20.8 percent). Below, responses are reported through percentages on items in the semantic differential and dichotomous-choice responses, in addition to comments obtained through more qualitative open-ended questions. All spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors appear in this study as they appeared in the survey responses.

Results

RQ1: What is the level of community engagement among residents of Kiowa County, Kansas?

Results suggest a high level of community engagement among survey respondents, as measured by behaviors such as participation in activities or causes, politics and elections, and current affairs. All but one respondent reported Kiowa County residency, and literally every respondent reported volunteering in the community to some degree, with nearly 28 percent (27.8 percent) volunteering "Very Often," 33.3 percent volunteering "Often" and 38.9 percent volunteering "Occasionally."

Similarly, only one respondent reported never working with someone to solve a community problem. Most, 38.9 percent, worked "Occasionally" with others to solve a community problem, while 33.3 percent "Often" did, and one-quarter "Very Often" did.

Almost half (47.2 percent) "Occasionally" participated in fundraising for a community charity or cause, with 30.6 percent and 13.9 percent, respectively, participating in fundraising "Often" or "Very Often."

Reflective of the older demographic of respondents — none were less than 30 years old and 59.4 percent were 50 or over — 80 percent of the respondents (n=35) reported voting in elections "Very Often" with 14.3 percent voting "Often" and 2.9 percent "Never" voting or voting "Occasionally." That voting behavior did not necessarily extend to political volunteerism. The majority (58.3 percent) "Never" volunteered to work for a candidate for political office, although one-third (33.3 percent) "Occasionally" did. A total of 5.6 percent and 2.8 percent, respectively, "Often" or "Very Often" volunteered to work for a candidate or political organization. Respondents were likely to voice their opinions to people in office, however. The overwhelming majority (77.8 percent) "Occasionally" contacted a public official about an issue, and 5.6 percent "Often" did. A total of 8.3 percent "Very Often" did, which was the same percentage as respondents who "Never" contacted a public official.

In response to other indicators of community engagement, 81.3 percent of respondents (n=24) reported owning their home and 71.9 percent belong to a church or other religious group. Asked about membership in community organizations, all who responded (n=16) listed traditional groups such as the Lions Club and the Chamber of Commerce.

Fewer than one-third of the respondents (31.3 percent, n=32) reported subscribing to the local weekly newspaper. Respondents nevertheless reported high levels of interest in community affairs. A total of 87.1 reported following city and county news via traditional media, the Internet or other sources "Very Often" or "Often," and 80.6 percent said they talk about current affairs with others "Very Often" or "Often."

While they may not be subscribing to the newspaper, nearly 72 percent (71.9 percent, n=32) of respondents reported contributing a news item to it, which could bode well for the Media Center's goal of providing citizen-generated content. General news was the most frequently contributed followed by birth announcements, social news, church news, weddings/engagements, club news and Chamber of Commerce/economic development news. One respondent reported contributing a weekly news column for several years.

Utilizing measures of involvement well established in community engagement scholarship, respondents displayed a high-level of participation in community activities and issues, perhaps as a result of being an older demographic group with long-standing roots. Of those who reported their number of years of Kiowa County residency (n=30) — as opposed to "all my life", etc. — the median was 30 years.

RQ2: What are the attitudes of county residents towards the Kiowa County Media Center and citizens' perceptions of the Center's perceived benefits to the community?

Respondents (n=32) responded affirmatively to a qualifying question: "Have you heard of the Media Center…?" Most frequently, they reported learning about it from the local newspaper, friends/word of mouth and "through all means of publicity." Typical of small communities, responses also included, "They are located next to my office," "watched it being built," "If you live in Kiowa County, who hasn't heard of the Media Center," and, simply, "I live here."

Nearly two-thirds (65.6 percent) of the respondents said they saw the Media Center benefiting Kiowa County. Responses about both the positive and negative aspects of the project were sought. Some respondents expressed unequivocal enthusiasm and several cited benefits to young people. One respondent said, "They work closely with the school. Kids love it. Administration of the school think Media Center can walk on water. Will broadcast games and public service meetings etc. It's fantastic," with another saying it's "Another avenue for learning for the young people," and yet another saying "students of Kiowa County will benefit from the exposure to the technology offered." Finally, respondents said it will allow "new and more opportunities for young people to discover new passions in their lives. and give them something new to work towards or to be a door to do something else in a professional career" and it will "give the younger people something to be involved in." Other respondents said the Media Center can promote the environmental goals of the county, it will help tell the Kiowa County story, it will promote public outreach and it can, in the future, offer worthwhile programming. "It will bring our population into the electronic age," said another respondent.

Most of the negative responses centered on costs to the county versus perceived benefits; as one respondent said, "The county should not be in the media business. What is being funded is not worth what is being produced." Another respondent said, "Not sure how that is a necessity to have to spend money on," and yet another said, "I believe the cost to the county will be greater than any benefit." One respondent pointed out the unequal access: "I don't think it's necessary. The basketball games did not broadcast right and if you don't have a computer you can get no benefits." One respondent, prefacing the comments by saying, "Really I wanted to say maybe"

there are benefits, but "It is costing the county way to much for what little benefit I see. Do we need that whole center to videotape Santa with Kids? It isn't doing anything like they initially put in their business plan." Other respondents said they are not sure — or not sure at this early stage — what the positive or negative benefits are or will be. A couple of respondents saw a political component to the Media Center, including one who said the sentiment is shared by "a lot of people here in town." "It seemed like an unnecessary expenditure and costly luxury wanted by only a few citizens with political pull," said another.

Of the 27 respondents who listed categories of information they like to see on the Media Center's Web portal (local government news, high school events, senior citizen news, community events, obituaries, etc.), most listed "all of the above" or "all of the above and more." Some respondents specifically identified school news, community events, local government news, and news of interest to senior citizens such as "interviews with older generations about family and local history made before this generation passes." Identified, but slightly less often, were obituaries, church news, business news, organizational news and current events. One respondent wanted "any community information that is not available on other local websites" and another said, with emphasis: "Live and/or taped coverage of City Council and County Commissioner meetings. Working with the Kiowa County Signal newspaper — not in competition against it — to further information dissemination in the community…." Some respondents reported never using the Media Center website and others said there is no content they would like to see on it.

Although a majority of respondents (53.1 percent) said they would "Occasionally" contribute information to the Media Center (news stories, social news, pictures or videos, etc.), over one-third (37.5 percent) said they would "Never" contribute content. Nearly 10 percent (9.4 percent) said they would contribute content "Often" but no one predicted contributing content "Very Often."

Respondents universally were aware of the Media Center, and a majority saw benefits to it, particularly among the younger demographic. But concern about costs versus benefits and lack of full community buy-in was observable. While respondents seemed appreciative of the local-news and information potential of the Media Center's content and would occasionally contribute content, a sizeable percentage of respondents did not plan to participate.

RQ3: Beyond the known criteria of individual community engagement, what other factors are unique to the adoption of a computer-mediated communication hub?

Researchers sought to examine what factors and/or obstacles may need special consideration due to the nontraditional nature of a multi-platform, open-source, nonprofit computer-mediated communication center. In response to the question, "What do you see as the obstacles to your getting involved (lack of equipment, technical skills, time, interest, etc.?)," lack of technical skills was the most frequently cited obstacle that respondents (n=26) perceived would prevent them from creating content for the Media Center Web portal, followed closely by lack of time. The next most frequently cited obstacle was a collapsed category of lack of interest and lack of relevance, presumably meaning the Media Center's perceived lack of relevance. Lack of equipment also was cited.

In response to a question seeking perceived solutions to factors and/or obstacles preventing participation in the Media Center (n=18), the most frequently suggested solution to perceived obstacles was a collapsed category of adult classes, workshops and volunteers to help

would-be contributors' content creation, perhaps an unsurprising finding given the number of respondents who saw lack of technical skills as problematic. On a related note, one respondent noted that (s)he needed to be "about 50 years younger!" The second most frequently cited solution related to community awareness of the project. "They need a PR plan to sell the benefit to the public," said one respondent. "That thing is a divisive issue here." Another respondent suggested more publicity in the *Kiowa County Signal*, which is the local weekly newspaper; in the County Research and Extension Agent's weekly electronic newsletter; and on the community's sign. Yet another suggested "Better PR advertising the Media Center's offerings. Working within the community to offer program & services that are actually needed. Working with the Kiowa County Signal on a shared information platform." One respondent, acknowledging that corporations have donated much to the Media Center, said corporate donations of equipment should be explored to an even greater extent because "the locals are getting pretty tapped out after the tornado." Solutions to the obstacles of time included "retirement" and the unlikely "more hours in a day." The respondent who cited the solution, "And more people to watch my son," also may have been responding to a perceived lack of time.

Throughout the results, there appears to be a small, but noticeable, minority who see no value to the Media Center and have no plans to participate at least partly because of a perceived political component to the Media Center's inception and at least partly because of the public-dollar financing component. Fifty percent of the respondents (n=32) said they do not support using public funds to finance the Media Center. Those who did ranged from somewhat supportive (28.1 percent), to supportive (15.6 percent) to very supportive (6.3 percent).

Other

Because of concerns reported in earlier focus group research (Smethers, *et al.*, 2010), one question asked about perceptions of duplication between the Media Center and the local weekly newspaper. Most (61.3 percent, n=31) perceived "Some Duplication and 9.7 percent perceived "A Lot of Duplication." Still, a substantial number (29 percent) perceived "No Duplication."

In addition to demographic results reported earlier, respondents' age categories (n=32) were: 18-29, 0 percent; 30-49 years, 40.6 percent; 50-64 years, 37.5 percent; 65-74 years, 15.6 percent; and 75 and older, 6.3 percent.

More than half (54.8 percent, n=31) of respondents were male; 45.2 were female.

Nearly half (48.4 percent, n=31) of respondents graduated from college or technical school, nearly two-fifths (38.7 percent) had postgraduate education and 12.9 percent graduated from high school.

Discussion

This exploratory study examines community engagement and the acceptance of a computer-mediated communication hub in the rural Kiowa County, Kansas, community of Greensburg. Results suggest a high level of community engagement among survey respondents, as measured by behaviors often associated with community engagement and affection (Littau, Thorson and Bentley, 2007), including community volunteerism, a propensity to vote in elections, experience working with others to solve community problems, fundraising, interest in community affairs, home ownership, and membership in churches, civic and social organizations. Community-engagement results may be influenced by the fact that respondents represented an older

demographic of longtime Kiowa County residents. It can be further surmised that residents who opted to return and rebuild their homes and businesses after the 2007 tornado devastated Greensburg were, by definition, people who had made an affirmative, proactive decision to engage in their community.

The previously mentioned criteria for the success of citizen journalism projects cited by Watson (2011) — engagement, technical skills and user dependency on interactivity in consuming and providing content — is relevant when examining the results of this study, where a mostly community-engaged sample population expressed some skepticism toward the news portal, which, by the admission of many subjects, relates to their perceived skills. This is the second time that research in Greensburg and its surrounding county has reflected some reservations about individual citizen use and propensity to participate (cf., Smethers, Freeland & Rake, 2010). By the admission of many respondents in this study, there is a question relating to the technical competence required to participate in Media Center functions. The overall older age of the respondents in this study, a group that has been accustomed to traditional media consumption and less reliant on computer-related platforms, may not see themselves as ready for the interactive nature of a citizen journalism venture. Indeed, that sentiment could explain the tendency of respondents to single out young people as prime beneficiaries of the Media Center project.

Obviously, this points to education in video and audio storytelling as a major factor of sustainability, but it also suggests a possible "technophobia" (Brosnan, 1998) toward the skills needed for participation. The need to overcome that barrier is among the most important findings of the study because sustainability of the Media Center is dependent on broad-based participation among county residents, including the older demographic. To date, the vast majority of participation and content creation involves high-school students who may relocate to other areas after completing their education. That said, it must be acknowledged that the Media Center has identified education and training of community participants as a need, a need that could not be fully realized in the short time since the Media Center's inception.

A related concern is the identifiable lack of buy-in from a small segment of the community. The fact that more than one-third of respondents reported that they would never contribute content to the Center should not be overlooked by this or any entity seeking to establish a similar model for communitywide storytelling. It can be acknowledged that the social dynamics of small-town America may well include a small, but often vocal, contingent whose lackluster response to innovation can be frustrating to community leaders. However, in this study, a measureable number of people, who had exhibited high levels of community engagement, also called for more and better marketing, public relations and advertising. As every respondent indicated awareness of the Media Center, a promotional/public relations campaign would be advantageous if it focuses less on the Center's *existence* and more on the value of programming and benefits of participation to individuals and community. Further, soliciting more community involvement and feedback prior to content creation could help inform what types of news and information would be most desirable.

While this study is largely exploratory, it is significant in two ways. First, it fills an existing void in communication and civic engagement scholarship. Literature on civic engagement suggests that media consumption, as well as writing letters to the editor on community issues, are indicators of civic engagement (CIRCLE, 2003). Similarly, Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) view the existence of a communication infrastructure and micro- and meso-storytellers as vital to the civic health of communities. But as the findings from this study seem

to point out, computer-mediated communication infrastructures pose unique challenges such as fear of technology, lack of skills, and demographic patterns that must be considered. Even in communities with higher levels of civic engagement, citizens' propensity to contribute to a local community journalism project might hinge on factors and indicators that are not currently addressed by the literature. There is clearly a gap that ought to be acknowledged in the literature as a possible hindrance to the success of technology-based community communication hubs.

Second, this study reveals a void in existing literature: studies examining the need for community involvement in designing information hubs. By its very nature, citizen journalism breaks down the gatekeeping role of traditional media organizations in determining what is newsworthy and vests such power in community storytellers. It is equally important to remove or address the gatekeeping role of civic leaders while designing such communication hubs. Some of the resistance detected in the survey results stem from a feeling of community exclusion in the initial decision making process, underscoring the need to rethink how noble community journalism innovations are introduced in communities.

Last is the thorny issue of financing the Media Center and similar proposals. Half of the respondents did not want public funding for the center, which could be state and federal grants and other monies and, perhaps more to the point, local tax dollars. Clearly, the Kiowa County Media Center must establish independent revenue streams, a challenge exacerbated by its nonprofit status. Current plans include identifying and cultivating revenue sources in larger regional cities, which could at least temporarily shift attention from the citizen journalism, community-storytelling goal of the Media Center. That said, partnerships with commercial enterprises beyond the community might be a necessary forerunner to achieving a sustainable citizen journalism hub.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the sample for this study can be regarded as a limitation, the purposive nature of the population surveyed is nonetheless important, since it was necessary to yield subjects who were most likely to contribute information germane to this study. In this case, the non-random sample yielded valuable feedback from local business leaders and managers who were familiar with the Media Center and the community, and they provided unique and meaningful input on the central research issue: if a community builds a state-of-the-art multimedia operation that relies on citizen-produced news, will local residents support it? Because of their standing in the community, the 36 people who completed the survey — 20.8 percent of the total solicited — were believed to possess characteristics of civic engagement who would also be active local news consumers (Stamm, 1895; Rothenbuhler, *et al.*, 1996), an assumption that data supported. Further, the age homogeneity — no respondent was under 30 years old — was not unanticipated because the respondents were established in the business community. Thus, they were judged to possess both sufficient knowledge of the research issue and have the capacity and willingness to participate in the research.

Clearly, the findings reported here open the door for further research that would provide richer data, such as a more broadly focused survey distributed to the 2,549 residents of Kiowa County to gauge their levels of civic engagement, their degree of support for the Media Center initiative, and their willingness to participate in content creation for the Center. Additionally, an analysis of the origins of the content distributed by the Media Center would suggest actual levels of citizen participation. Certainly, future studies should focus on a key finding yielded here:

effective methods for recruiting and teaching laypersons the fundamentals of audio and video production and storytelling. Such studies need to delve into attitudes toward learning these new skills and how to overcome certain barriers associated with teaching such skills to adults.

While the Kiowa County Commons with its multi-million dollar Media Center was a direct result of a tornado that devastated the tiny, Midwestern rural community, this and future research could provide prescriptive insight for other rural communities that could find such a model — albeit whatever the size and scope — useful in the creation and distribution of the communities' news of the day.

Works Cited

Ablah, E., Tinius, A., Konda, K., Synovitz, C. (2007) Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness. In *Regional Health System Response to the 2007 Greensburg, Kansas, EF5 Tornado.* 1: 90-95. American Medical Association.

Andreson, S.E., & Gansneder, B.M. (1995). Using electronic mail surveys and computer monitored data for studying computer mediated communication systems. *Social Science Computer Review,* 13(1): 33-46.

Birdsall, W.F. (2007). Web 2.0 as a social movement. *Webology*, 4(2). Available at: http://www. webology.ir/2007/v4n2/a40.html

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Bowman, S & Willis, C (2003). *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Major Information*. Reston, VA: American Media Center at The American Press Institute, 60. http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf, accessed 5 December 2013

Brosnan, M.J. (1998). *Technophobia: The psychological impact of information technology.* (New York: Routledge).

Carpini, D. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment. *Political Communication*, 17, 341–349.

CIRCLE (2003). *The Civic Mission of Schools*. College Park, MD: The Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership (2004). A Working Definition of Civic Engagement, nlu.nl.edu/cec/upload/Working-Definition-of-Civic-Engagement.pdf, accessed March 31, 2013.

Coleman, J. (1988). Social Capital and the Creation of Human Capital, *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (Suppl.), S95-S120.

Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Deuze, M., Bruns, A., and Neuberger, C (2007). Preparing for an Age of Participatory News, *Journalism Practice*, 1(3), pp. 322-38.

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Dillman, D.A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method.* New York: Wiley Interscience.

Friedman, T.L. (2005). *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Hayden, C., & Ball-Rokeach, S.J. (2007). Maintaining the digital hub: Locating the community technology center in a communication infrastructure. *New Media & Society*, 9: 235-257.

Hermida, A. and Thurman, N. (2008). A Clash of Cultures: the integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites, *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), pp. 343-56.

Hoffman, L.H., and Eveland, W.P. (2010). Assessing causality in the relationship between local community attachment and local news media use. *Mass Communication and Society,* 13: 174-195.

Janowitz, M. (1952). *The Community press in an urban setting*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Kim, Y., & Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2006a). Civic engagement from a communication infrastructure perspective. *Communication Theory,* 16: 173-197.

Kwak, N., Williams, A., Wang, X., and Lee, H (2005). Talking Politics and Engaging Politics: An Examination of the Interactive Relationships Between Structural Features of Political Talk and Discussion Engagement, *Communication Research*, 32(1): 87-111

Lacy, S., Duffy, M., Riffe, S., Thorson, E. & Fleming, K. (2010, Spring). Citizen journalism web sites compliment newspapers. *Newspaper Research Journal,* 31(2), 34-46.

Littau, J., Thorson, E. & Bentley, C.H. (2007). Citizen journalism and community building: Predictive measures for social capital generation. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, D.C.

McLeod, J.M., Daily, K., Guo, Z., Eveland, W., Bayer, J., Yang, S. and Wang, H. (1996) Community Integration, Local Media Use and Democratic Processes. *Communication Research*, 23(2): 179-209.

McLeod, J.M., Scheufele, D.A and Moy, P. (1999). Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation. *Political Communication,* 16(3): 315-336.

Mehart, M. (2008). Conversations about local media and their role in community integration. *Communication*, 33: 233-246.

Mehta, R. and Sivadas, E. (1995). Comparing response rates and response content in mail versus electronic mail surveys. *Journal of the Market Research Society,* 37(4): 429-439.

Mutz, D. and Martin, P. (2001) Facilitating Communication Across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media. *American Political Science Review*, 95(1): 97-114.

Mutz, D. (2002). Cross-cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1) :111-126.

Mutz, D. and Martin, P. (2001). Facilitating Communication Across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media. *American Political Science Review*, 95(1): 97-114.

Mutz, D. (2002). Cross-cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1): 111-126.

Pratte, R. (1988). *The Civic Imperative*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Putnam, R.D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, R.D (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1): 65-78.

Rosen, J (2008) A Most Useful Definition of Citizen Journalism, *PressThink*, http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2008/07/14/a_most_useful_d.html , accessed February 23, 2014.

Rothenbuhler, E.W., Mullen, L.J., DeLaurell, R., & Ryu, C.R. (1996). Communication. community attachment and involvement. *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly,* 73: 445-466.

Shah, D., McLeod, J., and Yoon (2001). Communication, Context, and Community: An Exploration of Print, Broadcast and Internet influences. *Communication Research*, 28(4): 464-506.

Stamm, K.R. (1985). *Newspaper use and community ties: Toward a dynamic theory.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Smethers, J.S., Freeland, G.B., & Rake, J.R. (2010). After the storm: Greensburg residents discuss an open-source project as a source of community news. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Denver, CO.

Tancer, B. (2007). Reports: online activities and pursuits, Wikipedia users. *Pew Internet & Life Project*, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/212/report_display.asp

Tapscott, D., Williams, A.D. (2006). *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything.* New York: Penguin.

Tse, A. (1998) Comparing the response rate, response speed and response quality of two methods of sending questionnaires: E-mail vs. mail. *Journal of the Market Research Society,* 40(4): 353-361.

Watson, H. (2011, August). Preconditions for citizen journalism: A sociological assessment. *Sociological Research Online, 16(3)*. http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/3/6.html, accessed March 31, 2013.

Wilson, R. (2008, November 19). "Now that's rural: Gene West, Part 2." *Kansas Profile*. http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/news/story/KSProfileGeneWest2111908.aspx, accessed March 31, 2013.