

# Research Essay: Weekly or Weakly Quality? A Comparative Analysis of Penetration, Quality, and Prizewinning at North Carolina Community Newspapers

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*This article explores the relationships among newspaper quality, circulation, and newspaper circulation penetration at North Carolina community newspapers during two three-year periods in 1998, 1999, and 2000, and 2012, 2013, and 2014. Winning prizes seems to be correlated with circulation size: the greater the circulation, the greater the resources to devote to creating journalism that captures awards. However, the gauge of the success and impact of a weekly newspaper community is evinced by the percentage (the higher the better) of circulation penetration in the core community.*

“Our job is to cover the everyday lives of ordinary people.”  
– Bernard L. Stein<sup>†</sup> (Lauterer, 2000, p. xxii)

Community or weekly newspapers have long been rooted in small towns, described by scholar Jock Lauterer as “newspapers of the Blue Highways, off the Interstates” where journalism with an intimate, obsessive, and “intensely local focus” is practiced (Lauterer, 2000, p. xxiii). The purpose of this article is to examine any relationships connecting winning prizes in North Carolina Press Association (NCPA) community newspaper contests with circulation, quality, and circulation penetration in two different time periods – 1998, 1999, and 2000 and 2012, 2013, and 2014.

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<sup>†</sup> Stein is the former co-publisher of *The Riverdale Press* of New York City. He won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing, one of the few weeklies to win the coveted award.

Defining quality can be both elusive and subjective. For the purpose of this research, it is defined as winning prizes in the annual NCPA contest. Community newspapers in North Carolina are, roughly speaking and mainly, weekly newspapers. The words “weekly,” and “community” are used interchangeably in this study when applied to newspapers.

## **Community Journalism**

Aileen Gronewold described weekly journalism as “the last front porch of America” (Gronewold, 1999, p. 4). Weekly newspapers “symbolize community” to their readers, she believed, operating as the “hub of the town” and “bringing people in touch with one another” (p. 1). Community newspapers were described by Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne, and George Killenberg as the “public conversational commons” (Anderson et al., 1966, 159). Ken Byerly coined the term “community journalism” while a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the early 1960s and authored a book titled *Community Journalism* (Lauterer, 2000). According to Kathleen Mason (2000), “Weekly community newspapers distinguish themselves from dailies by focusing nearly exclusively on the community or communities within their coverage areas, excluding national and international issues unless those issues directly impact the local communities.” Numerous studies define community in relation to geography or place, most especially towns, cities, or political districts (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 280).

Newspapers help create and define that unique community identity. It is not hard to see evidence of this. Look at a front page and it can be seen usually in large letters: the *Montgomery Herald*, the *Perquimans Weekly*, and the *Yadkin Ripple*. The warp and weft of small towns – Little League baseball no hitters, prom kings and queens, church socials, summer band concerts, and Homecoming football games may be ignored by larger media, but they are the grist and joy of weekly newspapers. As Lauterer perceptively observed, “[W]eekly people are so busy putting out the next paper that they don’t have much time for public relations – nor do they need it” (Lauterer, 2000, p. xxiii). Almost without exception, the newspapers in this study defined their communities by putting the town they serve in their front-page nameplate.

## **Research Hypothesis and Method**

Primary research and data collection were conducted to test the hypothesis that there are correlations among newspaper quality, circulation, and circulation penetration. The NCPA breaks community newspapers into three categories: Division A – newspapers under 3,500 circulation; Division B – newspapers 3,500-10,000 circulation; and Division C – over 10,000 circulation. Only divisions A and B were analyzed. A Division C newspaper, published three times a week with 25,000 circulation has considerably more in common with daily newspapers than with other weeklies of, say, 1,200 circulation.

The NCPA awarded first, second and third place honors in 24-30 categories in each of the two classes over the six years researched (1998-2000 and 2012-2014). Award data was gathered both from the NCPA office in Raleigh and from the NCPA website (NCPA). Each award was weighted: first place was assigned three points, second place two points, and third place one point. So, a newspaper with four firsts, one second, and two thirds would have a quality score of 16.

Two key terms warrant definition. “Circulation” refers to the overall total number of copies distributed by a particular newspaper per issue. “Circulation or market penetration” refers

to the percentage distribution within the core geographic area (market area) covered by a newspaper and defined by that newspaper, whether it be a town, towns, or county. Circulation may occur outside that area, of course, but this was not studied.

Scholars researching daily newspaper circulation are fortunate. The Alliance for Audited Media (until 2012 the Audit Bureau of Circulations) audits daily circulation. For community newspapers, third-party auditing is rare. Advertisers depend on U.S. Postal Service circulation and even notarized publisher's certificates. Annually, newspapers are required to publish an ownership and circulation statement during October. A combination of those methods was used to determine circulation numbers for this study.

There were exactly the same number of newspapers – 91 – in both study periods. All 91 of the weekly NCPA-member newspapers eligible for this study (Divisions A and B) were contacted by telephone up to four times to collect data. Six newspapers declined to participate in the study in the earlier period, while seven did so in the latter period. One post office refused to provide household address information, so its newspaper was removed from this study. Several business-only publications were not included in the study along with the *Outer Banks Sentinel*, an exceptional weekly newspaper, but one serving a string of beach towns covering parts of at least two counties. Depending on the year, only between two and five newspapers statewide do not belong to the NCPA.

## Findings

The hypothesis that quality is strongly correlated with newspaper circulation penetration is not supported by this research. However, circulation size *is* correlated with quality, but perhaps in a way not anticipated, related more to financial resources than any other reason. Circulation size may bring with it more advertising revenue that allows a larger news hole, a bigger and more talented staff, plus certain technological advantages. Circulation penetration, however, provided very positive news and hope for community journalists.<sup>‡</sup>

The Top 5 newspapers in terms of penetration are shown in Table 1. Looking at the top newspapers in terms of penetration, it appears there is a strong correlation between high penetration and low quality. The two newspapers with 100 percent circulation are free distribution. The Top 5 and Bottom 5 newspapers in terms of circulation are shown in Table 2.

In the first period, the only consistency appears to be in the Bottom 5 in circulation. Evidently, very small newspapers have a difficult time generating both quality points and circulation (both actual numbers and penetration). Clearly, having the resources and the money to invest in the news “product” can produce results. The patterns among the top newspapers were somewhat random, with inconsistent interactions among the variables. The *State Port Pilot* is the only newspaper that seems to represent fairly well the expected result, though penetration might have been predicted to be much higher. The *Pilot* dominated the NCPA contest in all the years studied, nearly doubling the quality score of the second-place *Tideland News* in the initial period and the *Cherokee Scout* in the second period. The *Littleton Observer* was a good example at the other end of the continuum: it had low penetration and low circulation numbers without quality points.

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<sup>‡</sup> As an aside, in the first period very few newspapers had websites, while a dozen years later virtually all had them.

**TABLE 1**

**MARKET PENETRATION**

1998-1999-2000

2012-2013-2014

**Top 5 – Penetration**

	Quality Pts.	Penetration %
1. <i>Weekly Post</i>	0	100
2. <i>Mountain Times-Avery Ed.</i>	5	100
3. <i>Chowan Herald</i>	2	90
4. <i>Clay County Progress</i>	3	87
5. <i>Red Springs Citizen</i>	2	89

**Top 5 – Penetration**

	Quality Pts.	Penetration %
1. <i>Liberty Leader</i>	0	100
2. <i>Blowing Rocket</i>	10	100
3. <i>Alleghany News</i>	4	81
4. <i>Jefferson Pilot</i>	4	76
5. <i>Avery Post</i>	0	75

**Bottom 5 – Penetration**

5. <i>Wendell Clarion</i>	9	23
4. <i>Clayton News-Star</i>	7	22
3. <i>Liberty News</i>	8	22
2. <i>Alamance News</i>	14	12
1. <i>Littleton Observer</i>	0	10

**Bottom 5 – Penetration**

5. <i>State Port Pilot</i>	103	16
4. <i>Highlander</i>	5	14
3. <i>Mebane Enterprise</i>	0	13
2. <i>Denton Orator</i>	0	12
1. <i>Alamance News</i>	15	12

**TABLE 2**

**CIRCULATION**

1998-1999-2000

2012-2013-2014

**Top 5 – Circulation**

	Quality Pts.	Penetration %
1. <i>State Port Pilot</i> (9,689)	108	16
2. <i>Cherokee Scout</i> (8,130)	13	79
3. <i>Alamance News</i> (6,656)	14	12
4. <i>Taylorsville Times</i> (6,600)	5	50
5. <i>Mountain Times Avery Ed.</i> (6,532)	5	100

**Top 5 – Circulation**

	Quality Pts.	Penetration %
1. <i>News Journal</i> (10,000)	6	36
2. <i>Franklin Times</i> (9,700)	0	33
3. <i>Jefferson Pilot</i> (8,950)	0	76
4. <i>News Reporter</i> (8,400)	0	44
5. <i>Lincoln Times-New</i> (7,998)	0	26

**Bottom 5 – Circulation**

5. <i>Liberty News</i> (1,0055)	8	22
4. <i>Spring Hope Enterprise</i> (984)	6	29
3. <i>Denton Orator</i> (900)	7	22
2. <i>Littleton Observer</i> (785)	0	10
1. <i>Rural Hall Indep't.</i> (343)	9	30

**Bottom 5 – Circulation**

5. <i>Rural Hall Indep't.</i> (748)	0	60
4. <i>Blowing Rocket</i> (700)	3	100
3. <i>Liberty Leader</i> (1,091)	0	100
2. <i>Highlander</i> (1,500)	50	14
1. <i>Cherokee Scout</i> (8,500)	60	72

The Top 5 quality point winners are shown in Table 3. Statistical correlations are shown in brackets; there is not statistical correlation (shown in brackets) in any of the quality scores from either period in any category. Mostly the correlations are non-existent or negative.

**TABLE 3**

**QUALITY**

1998-1999-2000			2012-2013-2014		
	Quality Pts.	Penetration %		Quality Pts.	Penetration %
<b>Top 5 – Quality [+.60]</b>			<b>Top 5 – Quality: [-.40]</b>		
1. <i>State Port Pilot</i>	108	66	1. <i>State Port Pilot</i>	103	16
2. <i>Tideland News</i>	57	76	2. <i>Cherokee Scout</i>	60	72
3. <i>Havelock News</i>	56	25	3. <i>Havelock News</i>	54	23
4. <i>Zebulon Record</i>	39	43	4. <i>Duplin Times</i>	36	43
5. <i>Wake Weekly</i>	37	44	5. <i>Chatham News</i>	30	26
<b>Bottom 5 – Quality: [-.20]</b>			<b>Bottom 5 – Quality: [-.00]</b>		
5. <i>Roanoke Beacon</i>	0	47	5. <i>Avery Post</i>	0	75
4. <i>Fuquay-Varina Independent</i>	0	46	4. <i>Yancey Common Times Jrn'l.</i>	0	64
3. <i>Pender Post</i>	0	35	3. <i>Rural Hall Indep't.</i>	0	60
2. <i>Chatham Record</i>	0	31	2. <i>Courier Times</i>	0	46
1. <i>Littleton Observer</i>	0	10	1. <i>Red Springs Citizen</i>	0	25

**Discussion**

The *Havelock Times* went out of business in the late 1990s. During the first two years of the first period, the *Times* and the *Havelock News* were both extremely successful in the NCPA contests. The *Times* tallied 11 quality points and had two first place awards in 1999. However, the *News* was considerably more successful, amassing 56 quality points and 11 first place awards with at least one in all three years. Havelock had a population of approximately 20,000 in the late 1990s. This head-to-head competition suggests that competition creates better products, whether they are newspapers, cars, allergy medications, or detergents. Employing the quality criteria of this research, the higher quality paper – the *Havelock News* – should have won the newspaper battle...and did.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, population sizes and economics tend to preclude competitive publications in the same town. There are, of course, notable exceptions to this trend. Two newspapers in Clay County (approximately 11,000 population) continue to thrive (to some degree) while still competing. The *Smoky Mountain Sentinel* would not reveal its circulation numbers at all during the first period, but claimed 63 percent in the second. The *Clay County Progress* indicated 87 percent penetration in the first period, slipping to 75 percent by the second. In North Carolina, for instance, two newspapers shared one town, each owned by one half of a divorced couple.

The countywide *Alamance News*, with one of the largest circulation in absolute numbers of any newspaper in this study, is dramatically different in penetration (just into double digits) from other countywide publications. It competes in a county that has a daily newspaper (the *Burlington Times-News*) and another weekly newspaper (the *Mebane Enterprise*). These are not, however, unique attributes of Alamance County. The *News* departs radically from the style and content of most weekly newspapers by not running obituaries, eschewing sports coverage, except a few features, and publishing pages of agate lines of bankruptcies, deeds, deaths, and crimes of all types. The *News* also attempts to cover nearly two-dozen small towns in Alamance County, so its numbers are diluted by the size of the county.

The vagaries of judging can clearly account for some differences – maybe even a substantial amount – in quality from year-to-year as well as between study periods. In 1989, for instance, the *Geneseo (Ill.) Republic* took first place for Best Use of Photos in the National Newspaper Association’s nationwide competition. However, the same entry in the same year only received an honorable mention in the equivalent statewide Illinois Press Association contest. Other confounding factors could involve the anomalies and serendipity of the submission process. Some newspapers may concentrate submissions in certain, limited categories because of particular strengths, building up quality points as a result. This, then, might affect general excellence as defined by this study.

Three newspapers went out of business in the interval between the two study periods: the *Randolph Guide*, *Fuqua-Varina Independent*, and the *King Times-News*. Six other newspapers merged: the *Littleton Observer* and *Lake Gaston Gazette* (now the *Lake Gaston Gazette-Observer*), the *Zebulon Record* and *Wendell Clarion* (the *Eastern Wake News*), and the *Pender Post* and *Pender Topsail* (the *Pender Topsail Post & Voice*).<sup>§</sup>

## Conclusions

Judging from the results of this study, winning press association awards is simply not a good measure of weekly newspaper success or quality. The prosperity of a community newspaper in North Carolina is judged, not by quality or circulation, but by readers sending in their renewal checks and plunking down a stack of quarters at the local gas station or grocery store. Success, seemingly, is all about circulation and the resources that provides.

Market penetration, not circulation is the pivotal indicator. For instance, the minuscule *Rural Hall Independent* (748 circulation) has zero quality points, but an impressive 60 percent penetration of its market area by doubling its overall circulation in the dozen years between study periods. Perhaps the real story involves the peculiarities and nature of small towns that share a unique, clear identity with the newspapers that serve it. If there’s a lesson for community newspaper editors from this study, it is this: engage more with their communities, expand coverage, while obsessively focusing on the people that make up those communities and their concerns. Rather than expend time and resources on contests *outside* their communities, the most successful weekly newspapers do a better and more essential job telling readers and community residents about themselves.

According to community journalism scholars Bill Reader and John Hatcher, “The modern community journalist is not an autonomous outsider, objectively recording all that transpires, but a community connector who has both a professional and a personal stake in that community” (2011, p. 8). Charles Kuralt called this a “relentlessly local” approach (Lauterer, 2000, p. xix). Robert Putnam observed that newspaper readers are “more rooted in their communities” (Putnam, 2000, p. 218). The best newspapers return the favor.

“A forum for parents to learn about the local schools, for residents to consider proposals for change, for church and civic groups to announce their doings, for neighbors to share happy times and sorrows.”  
– Bernard Stein (Lauterer, 2000, p. xii)

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<sup>§</sup> There were two name changes between 2000 and 2012 as well: the *Mountain Times-Avery Edition* is now the *Avery Journal-Times*, while the *Liberty News* became the *Liberty Leader*.

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