ISOJ 2018: Day 1, Afternoon Session

RESEARCH PANEL:
Future Vision: Conceptualizing Community, Seeking Solutions and Minding Metrics

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Chair: Amy Schmitz Weiss, ISOJ Research Chair; Associate Professor at **San Diego State University**

- ***Looking for Community in Community News: An Examination of Public-Spirited Content in Online Local News Sites***
  Summer Harlow, University of Houston, and Monica Chadha**,** Arizona State University
- ***Journalists' Perceptions of Solutions Journalism and Its Place in the Field***
  Kyser Lough, University of Texas at Austin, and Karen McIntyre, Virginia Commonwealth University
- ***Quality, Quantity and Policy: How Newspaper Journalists Use Digital Metrics to Evaluate Their Roles and Their Papers' Strategies***
  Kelsey N. Whipple and **Jeremy L. Shermak, University of Texas at Austin**

Summer Harlow: I'm Summer Harlow. I'm from the University of Houston, and I'm presenting research today with a colleague, who's also another former Longhorn, Monica Chadha, who's an assistant professor at Arizona State University. She is not with us today, but she's here in spirit. And a big thank you to Rosental and Amy, of course. Coming back to ISOJ is like coming home. So, it's so good to be here.

But what I want to talk to you all about today is the potential sustainability of online news. And I think that this really kind of fits well with what Darryl was just talking about. And when I say, "sustainability of online news," I'm not just talking about sustainability [of] online community news. I'm not just talking about sustainability in terms of financial sustainability. But also sustainability in terms of the ability of these online community news sites to maintain a mission of public spirited journalism, to maintain a mission geared at civic engagement. And I'll talk a little bit more about all of that briefly.

But just kind of to set the stage, right, we've all been talking today about sustainability, what's going to happen in the future, and with community news, the problem is not just financial sustainability, right? So as Darryl mentioned, we're seeing that mainstream newspapers are cutting back on their local coverage. There's just not as much of it. And this is a problem for democracy, right? If we're

talking about community news, and that community news is actually there to provide the information that citizens need in order to participate fully in civic and democratic and political life, then this local news becomes all the more important.

But not only are community news sites dealing with this question of financial sustainability, they're also dealing with the question of identity, right? Our definition of community has changed. Community is no longer bounded by geographic boundaries and limits, right? We've got communities of interest that are global. So even as the community or the definition of community is changing, what's not changing is that commitment to public-spirited content, or content that allows citizens to fully participate in society.

And so, when we think about community journalism then, and online community news, what I'm talking about is news where the journalists are part of the community. That they are advocating for their communities. They are not just covering their communities, they are participating in the communities. They are community cheerleaders. And in particular, there's four elements that, for the purposes of my research, it's important to understand that we think constitute this civic engagement criteria of community journalism.

We're calling it public-spirited content. And this revolves around the community cheerleading, number one. Number two, providing mobilizing information, which is also giving time, date, place, contact information, so that people can get involved in whatever is going on in their communities. It's advocating on behalf of the community and for the community. And then fourth, it is calls to action. So, going beyond providing the mobilizing information and beyond advocating and actually encouraging the public to get involved. Telling them that they should get involved.

So, we wondered, though, within this, when we're thinking about, what is community news, what is online community news, and how is it financially sustainable, can the entrepreneurial factors of financial, fundraising, business models, all of that, how is that going to fit in with this idea of public-spirited content and serving this civic engagement criteria?

So, we wanted to look at the relationships between revenue and inclusion of public-spirited content, ownership in public-spirited content, and a site's mission in public-spirited content. And then additionally, we wanted to look at interactive features, because, of course, interactivity, participation, that is fundamental to what the community news mission is, right?

So, how did we do this? We started off…. Michele McClellan does a survey every year of online local independent news sites, and we took the top five revenue earning sites, the mid five revenue earning sites, and the lowest five revenue earning sites, and then we conducted a content analysis of two weeks' worth of content from those 15 different sites. And we looked at 680 stories total.

Just really quickly, about half of the content came from for-profit sites, half from non-profit sites, and most came from the mid revenue earning sites. But when we

look at the public-spirited content, this is where things start to get interesting. And we see that, in general, these community news sites are not actually really following this civic engagement criterion. Most stories did not include public-spirited content. And when we did see public spirited content, the majority of it was mobilizing information and community cheerleading. And that was somewhat of a surprise, right? So, we think about community journalists [who are] supposed to be in the communities, participating in the communities, we would think that we might actually see more calls to action, more advocating.

When we look at revenue, what we see is that the advertising reliant sites included less public-spirited content than the more alternative funded sites, in terms of they are funded by foundations or grants or by government funding, instead of advertising. And to us, what this means is that the advertising reliant sites actually adhere to a more traditional form of journalism, right, the ideas of objectivity, neutrality, distance from the community—or a distance from the story. But of course, distance from the story actually translates to distance from the community; whereas, the non-advertising sites, those tended to follow more of this idea of journalism through an advocacy lens, right? That they actually did see themselves not just as covering a community, but actually a part of that community, participating in that community.

And then looking at amount of income, right? Because remember, we compared the high, the mid, and the low-income earners. And what we see is that the low-income earners actually included more calls to action and more advocacy stories than did the higher earning sites. It's also worth noting that the higher earning sites included more of the community cheerleading content. Maybe this is because the community cheerleading content is seen as more positive, more benign, and so it attracts more readers; therefore, it potentially attracts more advertisers and more revenue.

But also, you know, if you think about advocacy and call-to-action stories, those could be considered maybe a little bit more controversial, and so maybe therefore not as appealing to advertisers. But this warrants then a caution for community journalism practitioners, that we want to be sure that they don't just completely abandon the calls to action and the advocacy stories simply because they might be earning as much revenue as the more revenue-friendly cheerleading stories.

And then ownership. Again, when we look at the content across for-profit or non-profit, more of the community cheerleading content was in the non-profit sites, and more mobilizing information was in the for-profit sites. And I think this is because of our definition for mobilizing information. It could have include time, date, place, to participate in anything. And what we saw is that most of the time rather than a political event or a protest or something, it tended to be a grand opening of a business, so it makes sense then that that would be in a for-profit site.

And then mission. On the investigative watchdog sites and the demographic community or the sites that served a particular demographic community, those had more of the public-spirited content, which means that the general news sites had

less public-spirited content. They're neglecting it. So, this raises questions then about the extent to which we can actually consider these more general news sites to truly be online community sites, or rather, perhaps, they are actually just sites in a community writing about that community, but not really writing for and on behalf of that community.

And then lastly, interactive features. There's eight features in total that we looked at based off of Michelle's list survey. And what we see is that ownership makes a difference. The non-profit sites included much more of these interactive features. They had more freedom, a little bit more flexibility, perhaps. Same with the sites funded by foundations and university grants. So, what this means then…. And then, of course, the low income earning sites had fewer. So, what ultimately then this is telling us—just kind of rushing through this—[is that] we're starting to see the relationship between funding and innovation. That the sites that don't have to worry as much about offending advertisers perhaps have more flexibility. They can include more interactive features that can open up the gates to more user participation. But still, even though we see that it's these alternative funded sites and these non-profit sites that are the ones doing the more interactivity, they are also the ones who are earning more money. The low-income earning sites, they don't have the resources to have those interactive features.

So, the main takeaway then is that the sustainability of online community news sites, and of course the sustainability, again, not just in terms of finance, but also in terms of their commitment to that civic engagement criteria, not public spirited mission, it seems to be tied to new alternative ways of thinking about financing and ownership.

So, thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Kyser Lough: Thank you. Good afternoon. I'm Kyser Lough. I'm a third-year PhD student in the School of Journalism here at UT. And today, I'm going to talk to you about my project with Karen McIntyre from Virginia Commonwealth University on solutions journalism.

So, solutions journalism is a style of reporting that, basically, simply defined, is *rigorous reporting on responses to social problems.* And all it is, is just asking reporters to, instead of reporting on just what's going wrong in a community, look to what people are doing about it. So, it's not necessarily advocating for solutions or even coming up with solutions. But instead, it's just saying, "What are people doing about it?" You have your who, what, when, where, why, and solutions journalism is the what's next?

Why do we have solutions journalism? Why is that something that people are trying to push? Well, because of a lot of this. You have your headlines about how it's always bad news. We're always talking about doom and gloom. How much news is bad? How much do we exaggerate the negativity? And so, solutions journalism

comes to try and combat that a little bit, to show what good is being done in the community. And that's not to say that, again, you're promoting that. You're presenting these solutions of what people are doing, but you're doing it in the styles of normal journalism, so you're presenting it critically.

So, on the left, we have an example of a story that is looking to address issues of public health in a community. And so, they go and they find where people are conducting free exercise classes in schools to help with accessibility to these types of programs. But on the other side, we have a solutions journalism story that is taking a solution to gerrymandering and presenting it critically and looking at where the flaws might be. But the point is, you're talking about what's being done and presenting that.

So, a lot of academic research into solutions journalism, as of right now, has focused primarily on effects on the audience. The Center for Media Engagement here at UT has done a lot of this work initially. Karen and I have done some additional work, along with some other scholars. And so, we know that people that read stories that add on some solutions journalism typically report more favorable attitudes, more knowledge about the topic, self-efficacy, behavioral intention to either get involved or, in some cases, to donate, and just generally positive feelings. So, they engage more. They are more interested to spend more time with these stories.

But what we haven't really looked at yet is on the newsroom side of things. So, how do journalists think about solutions journalism? How do they position it within the whole field of journalism? And how is it carried out in their practice? So, that's what we decided to get at—looking at journalists' perceptions of solutions journalism and helping to position that and helping to see how it fits into their routines and habits.

The way we chose to go about this is using the hierarchy of influence as model. So, this model is the way to look at the many different factors that influence media coverage. And you'll see it starts very broadly with social systems. It goes down into social institutions and ideology. It moves closer into the media organizations themselves. Then, down to your routine practices [and] all the way down to the individual level. All these different things that influence how media is shaped.

And so, we took that model and we asked journalists about solutions journalism. We did in-depth interviews with journalists that were connected to the Solutions Journalism Network. That's an advocacy group out of New York. And we reached out to them because we wanted to find journalists who were aware of solutions journalism. They have a wonderful list of people who have attended trainings, of people who currently do it, but mostly just people who are aware of it, whether they practice it or not. And so, we reached out to those journalists. We did a long series of interviews, transcribed them, did a couple of deep reads, pulled out some themes, and that's what I want to talk about.

Our findings. We had a lot. I'm going to talk about three of them. The rest you can read about in our paper, which is online. But we looked at it from the institutional

level and we found that journalists position this really closely to investigative reporting, which sounds interesting, and we'll get to that in a second. There are still objectivity concerns, which I'm sure nobody is surprised. At the organizational level, we found that management is the thing above all that either helps or hinders the progress of solutions journalism. And then finally, at the individual and routine level, looking at habits of thought. We found that really the thing that changes when somebody does solutions journalism is their habits of thought and not necessarily the process of reporting itself.

So first, investigative journalism. How is this connected to solutions journalism? Well, a lot of our respondents called solutions journalism the next step. So if investigative journalism is the watchdog, solutions journalism is the guide-dog, and it tells you what's next. After you finish your three-part investigative series, where you expose a big social problem in the community, you then tack on the solutions piece and go into, well, what is the community doing about it? What's happening next? What is happening?

And so, the quote that really summed it up best from one of our interviews was, "I think solutions journalism is that final extra step, where you say, 'Here is something that could work here.'" But even note there, you're saying, "Here is something that could work here." That's a form of advocacy. And we saw that while a lot of journalists liked the idea of solutions journalism, there was still some imbalance in how objective they saw it. You have civic journalism and advocacy journalism and piece journalism. And solutions journalism is supposed to operate outside of that where you really add in that objective level. And while we found that the journalists said that solutions journalism engages the audience more, it helps restore media trust because you're going into more than just reporting the bad news, they still struggled with the objectivity level of it.

And so, we have two really good balancing quotes on this. On the very objective side, we have one journalist talking about how, "It's not just a story about me and what I think, it's a story about what's happening on the ground," while meanwhile on the very other side, we had someone who completely believes this is an advocacy style of reporting. You might as well advocate for something, right? Looking for a solution is being an activist. So, there's still a lot of conversation about the objectivity levels of solutions journalism in the people who have been trained on this and are aware of this.

At the routines level, we found that solutions reporting is just like normal reporting. We would ask people about their process of reporting a solutions story. And it was the exact same—you fact check, you seek out multiple sources. It's very rigorous. It's all of the same routines. But the biggest change came in the planning process. So, the habit of thought when you're conceiving a story, when you're thinking about who to talk to, you're thinking about how to shape this coverage, that's where it all changed.

There was one woman we spoke to. Her biggest thing was, she did a huge story map before she did a solutions story. She wouldn't do this with any of her other

stories. But she would get there and she would map out all the different facets of what's being done, see how they were connected, and really shaped her coverage that way to get herself in that mindset of looking for the solutions. Instead of going in there trying to reveal the problem or report on the problem, she was actively changing her habits of thought in how she approached that story.

And then finally, we wanted to know, what helps this happen? And what hurts this from happening? It all came down to management. I'm sure, again, that's no surprise. If the editor doesn't really believe in a solutions oriented approach, it was really hard for the staff reporter to get out there and pitch a story. Freelance reporters, especially, would identify the publications that are solutions friendly, so that they could get in there and pitch to them, because they knew that they would accept those stories.

But at the same time, management was what was helping it happen. So, the newspapers that were adopting this method of reporting that said, "OK, let's try and do some solutions focused journalism in our coverage, [and] let's incorporate that into our coverage," they would send reporters to other communities. One of the things you can do is, if your community is facing a social problem, you look at a comparable community that has done something about it or is trying to do something about it. And you send your reporter there to learn about that, and then come back and report on it and say, "Hey, this city is doing this. Here's where it's working. Here's where it might not be working. And here's how maybe it can work for our community." Well, that takes resources. And so, having the support from management to go out there and do that was very, very crucial for these journalists.

So, in summary, we found a lot of the definitions of solutions journalism reflected in the journalists themselves. We were excited to kind of see where it was placed within the whole realm of journalism, because we weren't sure where that kind of lands in the field.

Again, there's some more findings in there that I'd love for y'all to check out. And I would love to talk with y'all about any of it if you have any questions. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Jeremy Shermak: Thank you. Hello, everyone. I'm very happy to be here. Rosental, thank you for having me. I also want to recognize my co-author. There she is. Hi, Kelsey. As well, Kelsey and I began the program here at UT together. And we worked in newspapers as reporters before we decided to come to the extravagant, lavish lifestyle of grad school. Mild joke, really. But we talk about our career and what we did. And Kelsey…. And she never hesitates to remind of this—I'm years older than she is—and some of this new tech stuff wasn't around when I was there doing this, so we discussed this a lot. And we came to find out that journalists want to talk about this a lot. I love this tweet.

And this is a constantly evolving field, as we've heard a lot just today, right? And you know, the circulation numbers, quite obviously, just don't do it anymore, right? We need more, and we have the ability to get more information about our audience. And so, we create what we call an imagined audience. And the audience, it's what we picture. We can't possibly go and see everyone who's going to read our story. So, we have to make an imagined audience. And we do that today using data and insights.

But obviously, this has taken—this has changed the course of journalism. We've heard a lot about it already today. These metrics come into play, not just before the production of news, but during, after, it's constantly part of the cycle. So, we were curious about diving into this a little bit more.

We wanted to take…. We wanted to try to simplify the approach a little bit and look at kind of three different parties involved in the news production, and that is news organizations, what we called supervisors, and journalists themselves, the reporters themselves. And so, to do this, much like…. Well, I'll get to that in a moment. We really wanted to find out how metrics were affecting journalists, their perspectives and their perceptions of metrics while they were doing their work. All right? And also, the effect of metrics on the other elements of the newsroom and of the news business, quite frankly.

So, we used theory, and Kyser mentioned this theory in his presentation as well, where the hierarchy of influence…. And again, this is how the news production is changed and altered, you know, by various interested parties. And the three we focused on here, like I mentioned, are the news organizations, the supervisors, and the journalists. We applied another well-known mass com theory, and that is gatekeeping theory. And this is very simply the idea that, you know, a news product is produced, and then it goes through particular channels, be it editors, you know, advertisers sometimes, and it changes in some way that news product.

So, the gatekeeping theory, I think, is a very good way to illustrate just how metrics have changed things, because you see there's very traditional, and this is a very simplified version of this model. In this particular iteration, journalists create a news story and then send it through, you know, the processes and the guidelines of an organization. They send it through editors, and then away it goes into the news. What metrics have done have made this a little messier, right? There's this sort of tornadic kind of thing happening in the process. And metrics are used sometimes on the frontend, sometimes during.

We found literature that told stories of journalists posting news—I'm not being accusatory here—but posting news and then going back and looking at the metrics. And if they weren't where they wanted them to be, we would tweak a headline here. Maybe we'd tweet a caption here. So, they're a big deal. And they changed the product. It changed the mode of production.

So, what we did. We created a survey. And we distributed this to a lot more than 521 people, but we were really grateful those 521 people got back to us. If you've

done a survey, you know. And from 49 of the top U.S. papers, in terms of circulation. And we were able to gather a number of not only quantitative responses, but also some really interesting qualitative thoughts from the journalists and editors themselves. So, the journalists' response was that—and this is kind of a 'duh' response—but they believe very strongly that digital metrics are important in content decisions, right? And that's obvious, I would think. We weren't surprised, by any means with this finding. They also believed that their news organizations value the quality of their content the most. It wasn't just all about clicks. It's not all about…. They really believe that there is a value, still, in quality, and I think that's good news. The journalists also believed that their supervisors or editors value the impact that the content has on the community, above all. So, I think this represents good news here, that there's a lot of different perspectives that are putting quality in community first. That's still there.

We also broke out the journalists into three different categories—online, print, and what we called hybrid, who write for both online and print. And you would think that would be a lot more folks these days, but there's still those who do print only and do online only, of course. And we found—this is very straightforward—[they] said, "The more journalists know about their newspaper's digital strategy, the more likely they are to believe that strategy is successful." All right? They believe it. Doesn't mean that it is, but they believe it. All right? So, that's important. But we found that statistically significant in our findings.

We also heard from supervisors, those with decision power in the newsroom. And they said that they evaluate journalists' work in this order—the quality, which I mentioned before, so journalists had that perception correct, but then after that, they look at the attention it's gotten online, so direct page views, for instance, and then attention on social media, so likes, clicks, retweets, whatever it may be. And that was interesting, I think. That's what the supervisors were saying.

Our favorite part of this, though, was when you give people open-ended responses, oh, boy! Right? So, we really enjoyed these. One of them was…. We wanted to highlight some themes here. One theme was that print is still king, all right? And what we mean by that is there's still a lot of emphasis on print. People still—journalists, I should say, still really love their print. You can see by some of these quotes here that they are very concerned about the digital side coming in and taking people and assets and pulling them away there. In a shocking development, I talk too much, so I'm going to move faster.

So, loss of profit. Also, a lot of concern here as far as, you know, journalists were dismayed in many ways, because they achieved the goals that the editorial staff or that their digital content staff laid out in terms of clicks and shares and all the social media goals, but then they still said, "Hey, we took a loss anyway. You know, that was very frustrating." We saw a lot of that frustrating in the responses. I think this is a really telling quote. I'll read it to you. "I think we are unwitting participants in our own demise. We've outsourced our digital distribution to Facebook and Twitter, rather than spending the energy on creating an environment that people might consider a destination; i.e., a website they feel compelled to navigate and where

they know they will find curated content." Pretty honest and pretty telling. There's a lot to unpack there. I don't have—I only one-and-a-half minutes, so just tweet it out and we'll talk about it. Two minutes. Oh, I got two minutes. OK.

So, a couple of areas was, they felt that they lacked resources. And this was in the form of funding, right, but it was also in the form of developers and programmers and additional journalists. They just don't have those resources. And so there was a lot of frustration expressed there. This was one, I think, captured it well. "We are still worried about clicks and page views, when we should really be pouring resources into producing journalism that is actual journalism impacting readers." All right? So, a real keen awareness of that.

Too much change. A lot of uncertainty. There is a lot of uncertainty, instability that journalists expressed. And you really sensed that and how it affects their content, affects their confidence in their work. I think this is a telling quote as well. "I try not to think too big picture on my job. It'll give me a headache." I hear ya. "I can feel the newspaper industry collapsing. Those in charge don't seem to convey confidence that whatever new model they're implementing at the time is working." All right? So, they kind of suggested the dire straits and journalists are feeling. It also gives you a sense of the change. It's like, "Oh, here's another solution." You know, there's some doubt there.

So, just a couple of ideas looking ahead. Quality journalism is still the goal. I think, you know, that's the emphasis from all these groups that we surveyed. They're still very much focused on that. Journalists want to know that their editorial decisions aren't made entirely because of clicks. They're really resistant to that. And that was a big takeaway from the survey. And they also don't want to lose the print for the sake of the digital. And, you know, no promises there, right? That's the challenge, too. But they do want identifiable goals that are documented and everyone can stay on the same page moving forward with the plan.

So, it's a very telling survey, and we enjoyed doing it. Thank you for listening.

[Applause.]