

EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN NEWSPAPER BLOGS AND
SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

Jack J. Valenti School of Communication

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Sofie Svava Flensted

May, 2011

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of newspaper blogs to foster a sense of community among readers and if so, whether this has an effect on their reading behavior. An online survey was conducted among the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. The participants were asked to respond to twelve statements in order to determine their sense of community, as well as answering questions about their reading behavior and demographics. Findings suggest that blogs are a viable tool for newspapers to create a sense of community among the readers. Additionally, the results suggest some correlation between sense of community and reading behavior. However, further research is needed to determine the nature of this relationship.

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CHAPTER I

Exploring the Connection Between Newspaper Blogs and Sense of Community

Statement of Problem

The Internet has caused a revolution in communication technology. It enables the diffusion of enormous amounts of information and allows people to connect in unprecedented ways. One result of this development is the expansion of journalism to online platforms. According to Chung, Eunseong, Trammell & Porter (2007), “the news industry has experienced exponential growth of online news publications with the adoption of the Internet as a strategic medium for news delivery” (p.305). The authors further stated that the interactive nature of the Internet enables information and news to be delivered through a platform of multimodal and multidirectional capabilities.

The new possibilities of the Internet and online news have developed simultaneously with a continuous decline in the circulation of print newspapers. Weekday circulation of daily newspapers in America fell to 48.5 million in 2008. According to the Newspaper Association of America, this was its lowest point since 1945.¹ Additionally, Meyer (2009) pointed out that “the 2008-9 recession overlaid a cyclical downturn on top of the long, slow secular decline in readership that newspapers has been experiencing since the 1970’s” (p.1). At the same time, the audience and reach of online news has been growing (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2010). As a result of this development, editors are increasingly exploring the opportunities of

¹ <http://www.naa.org/TrendsandNumbers/Circulation-Expenditures.aspx>

the Internet for new ways to reach their readers. One such opportunity is the weblog, or blog. “At the most basic level, a blog is a regularly updated web page with relatively short posts, organized in reverse chronology such that the most recent post always appears at the top of the screen” (Hartelius, 2005, p.79). The use of newspaper blogs consequently allows readers to connect with both each other and the newspaper in unprecedented ways.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether newspaper blogs can foster a sense of community among the readers. Additionally, it examined whether this potential sense of community has an effect on reading behavior. Little research exist on the effect that newspaper blogs can have on their readers, especially when it comes to the potential fostering of sense of community. As such, newspaper blogs can still be seen as a somewhat unexplored area of research and should be further investigated.

Background

Online Journalism

During the past two decades, most mainstream news- and media organizations have started their own websites. As a consequence, both editorial production and the journalistic trade are faced with new opportunities and challenges. As stated by Franklin (2008), practically all print journalists today work across several media platforms. This requires them to not only deliver material for both the print and online editions of their newspapers, but also to possibly shoot and edit small video clips, record podcasts or write blog posts. This development has “resulted in a sprawling field of research, handbooks and theories dealing with one or more aspects of online news media production” (Deuze, 2003, p.204).

Deuze (2003) has defined online journalism as “journalism produced more or less exclusively for the World Wide Web” (p. 206). The component of technology is

the determining factor in distinguishing online journalism from other kinds of journalisms. According to Deuze (2003), the characteristics of online journalism have the potential to provide people with platforms for participatory, connective storytelling. This domain of connectivity facilitates a more open journalistic culture. He further claimed that online journalism has facilitated a shift in journalists' focus from content to connectivity. "A way of locating connectivity and an open culture in journalism would be dialogical journalism, where the contents of a news medium – for example a (part of a) website – are fully maintained by journalists interacting with citizens" (Deuze, 2003, p.205).

According to Chung (2008), "the potential of interactivity has fueled extraordinary anticipation over the adoption of a two-way communication model in the news industry" (p.658). Such interactivity challenges the traditional one-way flow of news. The audience is provided with increased options to choose from, and even has the opportunity to participate in the production of information. As a result, interactivity "has the potential to transform the nature of traditional journalism practice through online news" (Chung, 2008, p.658). Consequently, journalism is now experiencing a paradigm shift. According to Chung (2008), journalism is at a crossroad. Its content and form is continuously evolving through multimedia platforms and features such as hyperlinks that allow readers themselves to select stories. As such, "online newspapers are encouraged to share their control of news presentation with the audience by allowing increased communication among readers, promoting back-and-forth conversations between newsroom personnel and the audience, and providing opportunities for personalized journalism". (Chung, 2008, p.658-659)

According to Schultz and Sheffer (2009), newspapers have been investing in online formats for various reasons. “Online technologies could help media businesses improve efficiency and effectiveness and enhance communication with audiences. Online offerings can drive more traffic to newspaper Web sites. Online content also has a non-monetary value in terms of enhanced coverage and brand loyalty” (Schultz & Sheffer, 2009, p.30). According to Bucy (2004), the Internet should be viewed as a supplemental medium to build a relationship with an existing audience of a core offline product, such as a print newspaper. “From a relationship-building standpoint, understanding the nature and extent of Web page features that facilitate user involvement – and return visits – thus becomes paramount” (Bucy 2004, p.103).

Van der Wurff, Lauf,, Balčytien, Fortunati, Holmberg, Paulussen, et al. (2008) have pointed out that the development of online journalism and newspapers is still an “unfinished experiment in innovation in the newspaper industry” (p.403). Scholars and experts have been split between enthusiastic views of how the Internet could improve the dissemination of news and spur societal debate, and darker forecasts of how it would make traditional print newspapers become obsolete. At one hand, Van der Wurff, Lauf,, Balčytien, Fortunati, Holmberg, Paulussen, et al. (2008) have argued that “the development of online newspapers is a continuous search for ways to use the Internet technology to improve existing practices of news production and consumption” (p.403). On the other hand, as pointed out by Franklin (2008), the explosion of online news has caused many observers to be pessimistic about the future of print newspapers. “They cite the decline in newspapers titles, the dramatic losses in circulations, the growing attractiveness of the Internet and television advertising channels for readers and advertisers” (Franklin, 2008, p.307). Other pundits, however, are again more optimistic. “They acknowledge that newspapers need to strike an

urgent editorial and financial accommodation with the Web, but they believe that newspapers are adapting in both their contents and formats in response to developments in media technology, pressures of market forces and readers' changing requirements for news" (Franklin, 2008, p.307). Additionally, the availability of new media technology has caused many observers to express even more positive views of the future of newspapers. They see the popularity of this technology as a means to foster a more pluralistic and democratic debate about society and public opinion. "The model of journalism which previously witnessed journalists, columnists and lead writers handing down authoritative opinions in the manner of 'tablets of stone', is retreating to make way for a new journalism which seeks to encourage readers to join journalists in a more open and interactive discussion" (Franklin, 2008, p.307).

Role of the Audience

Television, radio, newspapers and magazines formerly facilitated the public space for discourse in democratic societies (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2010). However, the Internet has both expanded and transformed our ways to become informed. A large number of news consumers have turned to the web as a source of information. According to Pew Research Center (2008), online news consumption continues to grow, and substantial minorities of Americans are now using web-based and digital tools to get the news. In 2010, 57% of all Americans regularly got news from at least one Internet or digital source. Nearly half (46%) of the public say they get news online three or more days a week, up from 29% in 2004 and 37% just two years ago. About a third (32%) got news online every day, which is double the percentage that reported going online for news daily four years ago (Pew Research Center, 2010).

This development has not only changed the mode of information delivery, but also the role of the audience. "While traditional news media have delivered

information through a top-down, centralized model with journalists functioning as gatekeepers of information, online news media present greater opportunities for control and ownership as users assume more active roles in their news consumption experiences” (Chung, 2008, p.659). Fortunati & Sarrica (2010) have defined today’s online newspaper readers as e-actors, social figures that “subsume the roles of consumers, producers, designers, and stakeholders” and who are “overturning the power relationship with publishing groups” (p.251). Furthermore, Bucy (2004) argued that “with the rise of interactivity as the Holy Grail of audience outreach effort, media organizations have been confronted with the task of keeping users engaged in news content while harnessing the unique capabilities of the Web” (p.103). In line with this, Franklin (2008) pointed out that the biggest impact of the Internet on newspapers has been the expansion in the availability of news online, allowing an increased interactivity between readers and journalists. Readers can now contribute to news stories through comments and blog posts, “along with journalists’ eager courtship of citizen journalists and user-generated content” (Franklin, 2008, p.310).

In their study, De Waal & Schoenbach (2010) examined the profile of the online-news audience and how it uses and evaluates online news. They found that online news users are mainly younger and more highly educated compared to other people. Additionally, their findings suggest a significant decline in the use of print newspapers among online-news users. This is in particular true for young people. However, many respondents reported to use online news sites in addition to paper dailies. “This complementary use may have developed because traditional printed dailies and non-paper news sites serve different needs (e.g. background stories and editorial interpretation vs. breaking news)” (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2010, p.490).

According to Surman & Wershler-Henry (2001), “the real difference between

the Internet and all preceding media forms lies in its relationship to the public. Online, people aren't just the audience – they are also the content. The Internet is made up of people” (p.42). The authors claim that the real power of the Internet lies in *the collective* – the interconnection of people and ideas that happens online. An example of such an interconnection is the blog. According to Matheson (2005), “the weblog provides a case study of how one form of online journalism is rearticulating existing norms, and particularly some of the epistemological foundations of newswork” (p.444).

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study can be found in the works of Anderson (1983) and McMillan & Chavis (1986) concerning the creation of community. According to Anderson, all communities larger than primordial groups with face-to-face contact are imagined. He reasoned this with the fact that members of any larger groups will never know or meet most of their fellow members. However, they all have an image in their minds of their communion. Furthermore, Anderson identified the newspaper as an important vehicle for the creation of an imagined community.

One way to measure community is by examining a sense of community. Conceptualization of this measure can be found in the work of McMillan & Chavis (1986). According to them, sense of community consists of four elements. The first element is membership, described as a feeling of belonging or as a sense of personally relating to other members of the community. The second element is influence, which is a sense of mattering, both of the members mattering to the group and the group mattering to the members. The third element is integration and fulfillment of needs, a sense of having their needs met by being members of the group. The fourth and last

element is shared emotional connection, defined as the sense that the members share history, time and similar experiences together.

Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman (1986) developed the Sense of Community Index (SCI) as a way to operationalize and measure sense of community. The SCI consists of twelve statements that were chosen to represent perceptions of sense of community in terms of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection. The reliability of the index to determine sense of community was assessed and confirmed in a study conducted by Chipuer & Pretty (1999).

Furthermore, this study was also built on the hypothesis presented by Mersey (2009) that there is “a virtuous cycle linking newspapers readership to a sense of community in a manner that enhances social capital, the interwoven fabric of social connections that results in cooperation, trustworthiness and civic participation” (p.105). According to Putnam (2000), sense of community comprises social capital and this social capital leads to increased civic engagement. He further argued that newspaper readership remains a mark of substantial civic engagement. Kushin (2009) proposed to see civic involvement and Internet use as interwoven activities. Furthermore, he suggested the examination of specific forms of media use as manifestations of civic life. As such, both newspaper readership and the use of the Internet, such as reading blogs, can potentially be seen as products of social capital created by a sense of community.

Significance of Study

In a time of constant development and reformation in media and newswork, research into new ways of reaching the audience and their possible effects is crucial. As the number of newspaper blogs increases, it is important to assess their possible value as a tool to maintain and possible increase the readership. Measuring the sense

of community experienced by the blog readers is one way to do so. According to Blanchard (2004), the term community implies an emotionally positive effect. This positive emotion forms an inherently rewarding reason to continue participation in the community. Blanchard (2004) argued that when this positive feeling of community appears, participants are more likely to maintain or increase their participation in the group. Consequently, it stands to reason that if newspaper blogs manage to foster a sense of community among readers, they have the potential to uphold their readership.

Additionally, examination of the impact of newspaper blogs on readers is beneficial because scholarly research on this topic is still in its developmental stage. “Despite the intense interest and growth in the number of (newspaper) blogs and their audience, editors and scholars are still struggling with how to harness the Web in general, and blogs in particular effectively” (Dailey, Demo & Spillman, 2008, p.53). Additionally, Schultz & Sheffer (2009) has argued “research into how consumers are using (newspaper) blogs would be enlightening” (p.40). Consequently, it is valuable to continuously assess how blogs are being diffused into journalism and the possible affect this has on the audience. According to Mersey (2009), little attention has been paid to the impact on the sense of community when readers move from print to online news. Therefore, this study explored whether newspaper blogs can create a sense of community among its readers and whether this can have an effect on reading behavior. It was designed to contribute to the development of a foundation of increased knowledge about how blogs can be used by newspapers to reach their readers and maintain and possibly increase their readership.

To summarize, the purpose of this study was to explore newspaper blogs’ potential ability to foster a sense of community among the readers and if so, whether this sense of community has an effect on reading behavior. The *Houston Chronicle*

news blogs formed the basis for the study. The participants were the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Therefore, the questions addressed in this study were: Do the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs foster a sense of community among readers? To what extent, if any, does sense of community affect reader behavior? To explore these questions, an online survey was conducted among 123 of the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Participants were asked to complete a self-administered survey containing statements to determine their sense of community, as well as questions about their reading behavior and basic demographics.

The remainder of the study will be as follows: Chapter II reviews the literature on blogs, the building of community and sense of community. Chapter III presents the research methods of the study. Chapter IV presents the results of the study, while Chapter V discusses them in further detail. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also covered in the last chapter.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter provides an in-depth review of the relevant literature regarding newspaper blogs and sense of community. In order to address newspaper blogs, they are placed within the wider development of blogs. Furthermore, blogs in general and newspaper blogs specifically are discussed in relation to sense of community. The chapter provides a basis for the theoretical framework used, as well as the research questions posed for this study.

Blogs

According to Dailey, Demo & Spillman (2008), research on blogs tend to define them as “user-generated, frequently updated Web pages containing text, pictures and video on which individuals or groups present their thoughts, activities or interpretations of events. Blog entries are dated, and the newest material appears at the top of the page. Readers usually are able to respond to each entry” (p.55). Even though blogs have gained popularity over the last decade, they are still part of a developing and growing aspect of the Internet. “While the technology behind weblogs has been around since the early 1990s, this particular Web page format gained rapidly in popularity in the late 1990s with the launch of easy-to-use, freely available software like *Blogger*, *Livejournal* and *Weblogger*” (Haas, 2005, p.387). The number of blogs has exploded since then. As of November 2010, 151 million blogs were indexed by BlogPulse, an online blog directory (www.blogpulse.com).

Blogs can take on many forms. They may be a personal diary or journal, a news service, a commentary platform, or a collection of random thoughts. However, some general categories of blogs have been established. Hewitt (2005) claimed that blogs can be divided “along a spectrum that begins with *pure aggregators* that simply point readers to key links, and *pure analysts* who simply write their views on critical issues and events” (p.XI). Hartelius (2005) has suggested a taxonomy of blogs that distinguishes between group blogs and personal blogs. “The group blog is a site with a multitude of contributors, typically published by an organization, company, agency, or institution. These blogs are often attached as an interactive feature of a particular organization’s website” (Hartelius, 2005, p.80). As such, they not only offer information but also give the reader an option to respond. Hartelius (2005) pointed out that when exploring group blogs, the issue of potential community is significant. “Group blogs facilitate the formation of a...community around a specific topic. A sense of community is cultivated in this localized space – local in a non-geographic, border-transcending sense” (Hartelius, 2005, p.80). In contrast to the group blog, the personal blog has one primary contributor. “It is comparable to an online journal or diary, wherein the blogger is free to post anything that he/she feels illustrates and enhances the expression of self” (Hartelius 2005, p.83).

Because of the wide variation of content and sources of blogs, their quality can sometimes be questionable. “There are some well-maintained, high-quality weblogs that provide a valuable service, but there are also many weblogs that serve no apparent purpose apart from providing the owner with an online public space. Sheer numbers, though, suggest that weblogs cannot be ignored” (Clyde, 2004, p.1). Hewitt (2005) has described the expansion of the blogosphere as “an astonishing and still not quite comprehended explosion of text greater than any in the history of humankind” (p.70).

Millions of people are changing their habits when it comes to information and news acquisition. Blogs can thus be seen as an indication of information users on the move. Hewitt (2005) compared this reformation with the appearance of the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, television, and Internet. According to him, old media may be losing trust, while new media is gaining it. "People's attention is up for grabs. Trust is being transferred" (Hewitt, 2005, p.XVII).

Blogs provide a context for news and information. Many bloggers do not just publish press releases, they also do research and compare sources. Power (2005) claimed that "in America, if you want to dig deep, you call a blogger" (p.11). The Internet has empowered ordinary citizens, in the same way as journalists, to check facts and analyze information. People from widely different backgrounds can share knowledge and ideas and critique and challenge each other's work. For this reason, Power (2005) argued that "blogs have permanently and profoundly redefined the relationship between the individual and the masses" (p.9).

Blogs and Sense of Community

Kennedy (2008) suggested that there has been a shift in sense of community from traditional newspapers to the blogosphere. He proposed that "the best and more popular blogs provide a sense of community that used to be the lifeblood of traditional news organizations and, especially, of newspapers" (Kennedy, 2008, p.35). Furthermore, he argued that the traditional idea of community, based mainly on geography, is on the way out. Communities based on shared views have taken its place. The author identified the Internet as "an ideal medium for fostering a new type of community in which people have never met, and may not even know each other's real names, but who share certain views and opinions about the way the world works" (Kennedy, 2008, p.36). He pointed to the sense of community and conversation that

blogs have created around the news. According to him, news consumers still want the truth, but they also want to be able to share it and discuss it with like-minded individuals.

According to Lampa (2004) “the blogosphere forms...community based on a new form of amateurized and personalized journalism practiced by persons who may never meet one another yet can engage in conversation and share a common identity” (Imagined Community section, para. 3). He argued that this sense of community is created among its members “in a style that stems from the instant publishing medium itself to create a discursive, transnational, online...community” (Lampa, 2004, Imagined Community section, para. 3). This community of blogging enables the audience to experience a shared base of knowledge and to directly contribute to the cultural consciousness of the community. Furthermore, Lampa (2004) was inspired by Anderson’s (1983) view on the ritual of reading newspapers when stating that “for the foreseeable future, the...blogging community created by the mass ceremony of instant publishing will continue to produce previously unimaginable quantities of indexed, archived, and hyperlinked material that impacts people’s every day lives” (Imagined Community section, para. 2). According to Lampa (2004), the very nature of blogs facilitates a sense of community among its readers. “By facilitating the entrance of laypersons into online discussions regarding national and international events, issues, and ideas, the process of blogging has a democratizing effect that can evoke feelings of shared experience” (Lampa, 2004, Imagined Community section, para. 5).

Blogging provides a platform for reputation negotiation and the creation and exchange of social capital by encouraging and rewarding participation by individuals. “The ethos of personal publishing, then, is based on values such as inclusiveness and community, participation and deliberation, free and unfiltered expression” (Carroll,

2004, para. 3). According to the author, blogs' cross-links, referrals, trackbacks, and blogrolls facilitate interaction that at least begins to offer what social-capital-based definitions of community describe. These features specific for the blog format contribute at least to a sense or perception of community and common purpose, or communal ethos.

Newspaper Blogs

A subcategory of group blogs is the newspaper blog. According to Matheson (2004), newspaper blogs "can be situated also within a wider history of alternatives to established news forms, such as teletext in the 1980s, newsgroups, customized digital newspapers and online storytelling" (p.451). According to Pew Research Center (2010), about one-in-ten (9%) Americans regularly read blogs about politics or current events, another 19% sometimes turn to blogs for their news and 22% hardly ever read blogs. About half (49%) never read blogs or do not use the Internet. Among Internet users, 35% regularly (11%) or sometimes (24%) read political or news blogs.

Because blogs are increasingly viewed as a source of information for the public, Sweetser, Porter, Soun Chung & Eunseong (2008) have argued that journalists should adopt technology and online tools as means to facilitate their professional work. "With the public considering such sources, those in the communication industry must also incorporate them into their work" (p.169). Blogs serve as a platform on which journalists can communicate things that are not present on the news page. They also allow the journalist to be creative beyond the restrictions of the newsroom. To keep up with the shifting habits of the audience, journalists are increasingly incorporating blogging into their work. "Strategies for addressing the blogging challenge have already become evident. Journalism organizations have begun to offer blogs on their Web sites. Online journalists for news organizations have been publicly vocal about

the need to append blogging to journalism, or to adopt it as a news-gathering and fact-checking tool” (Lowry, 2006, p.493). The impact of these strategies contributes to reshape the professional process. According to Lowry (2006), the journalism community is trying to redefine blogging as a journalistic tool. “As a one-to-many form, it can remain something of a mass form of communication, although it invites user participation in a more strongly interpersonal relationship than much news” (Matheson 2004, p.460). Furthermore, “supporters of blogging in the online journalism community typically herald adoption of the blogging form and the monitoring of blogging content as evidence of a new participatory, more egalitarian journalism” (Lowry, 2006, p.493).

By providing multimedia platforms that enables interactivity, multimodality and hyperlinking, the Internet also enables a higher transparency in the news production process. The increased communication also provides the opportunity for a more personalized journalism. “While traditional news media have delivered information through a top-down, centralized model with journalists functioning as gatekeepers of information, online news media present greater opportunities for control and ownership as users assume more active roles in their news consumption experiences“ (Chung, 2008, p.659). According to Matheson (2004), the interactive aspect of blogging has fueled an important debate for many journalist bloggers about the shift from a mass medium to a more intimate one. This shift allows them to receive responses from and respond back to the audience on a more personal level. “The tension between writing authoritatively *for* a public and writing *to* a public is renegotiated constructively” (Matheson, 2004, p.453). Additionally, “the form of journalism found in the blogosphere has the potential to pull power away from the dominant one-way communication of formal and professional print and broadcast

journalism to a decentralized realm of individual publishers who not only consume texts but also produce texts that are circulated, reproduced, and consumed by others” (Lampa, 2004, Imagined Community section, para. 3).

Schultz & Sheffer (2009) have argued that, under the current newspaper environment, print managers appear willing to accept change and comply with new approaches. “New technologies offer newspapers reinvention through such opportunities as blogging, interactive reporting and podcasting” (Schultz & Sheffer, 2009, p.40). They pointed out that there is an obvious economic rationale for implementing change. According to Schultz & Sheffer (2009), “new media content providers, including blogs, have managed to absorb portions of the newspapers’ economic slice” (p.33). The authors also point to the rise in blog’s credibility as well as acceptance by traditional media users as another possible source of pressure for the news industry to conform to the new media landscape. Concern about losing readers to popular new mediums such as blogs may spur news managers to experiment with new platforms.

When examining the attitudes of newspaper managers towards blogs, Schultz & Sheffer (2009) found that the economic pressure of the current newspaper industry is pushing managers to accept new approaches such as blogging. “One could argue that newspapers are facing a critical make-or-break moment, although that remains unproven. But there is no shortage of dire news regarding the future of print and newspapers, which might make newspaper managers more willing to act” (Schultz & Sheffer, 2009, p.39). The authors furthermore suggested research into the area of how consumers are using these blogs. Having looked at the perspectives of both newspapers managers and journalists, they claimed that “both groups would profit from a study of consumer attitudes, perspectives and preferences” (Schultz & Sheffer,

2009, p.40).

According to Hull (2006), “the best newspaper blogs generate an avalanche of posts and comments from captivated readers, get linked to by other blogs and, ideally, drive more traffic to newspaper Web sites” (p.63). Dailey, Demo & Spillman, (2008) offered support for the notion that blogs can foster civic discussion, an important part of the democratic society. “Of particular interest to those who study communication and journalism is the notion that blogs shift control of information from traditional authorities to individuals who now have unprecedented opportunities for personal expression” (Dailey, Demo & Spillman, 2008, p.55).

Dailey, Demo & Spillman (2008) have claimed that the ongoing decline in newspaper circulation mirrors a similar decline in civic engagement. According to the authors, research suggests that Internet use in general and participation in online political discussion and discourse in particular are strong predictors of political participation. Consequently, they stated that “the editors reason that if newspaper blogs can engage new audience members in a conversation, civic participation will rise and so will the number of news consumers” (Dailey, Demo & Spillman, 2008, p.56). Blogs can hereby be viewed as a vehicle for reader contribution. According to Thurman (2008), “blogs represent the best-known form of invitation that writers use to initiate conversations with readers online” (p.145). Additionally, Cammaerts (2009) stated that blogs are seen as a tool for equal participation and also a higher degree of publicness. Because blogs are participatory and interactive, they allow citizens “to freely and openly engage in the public sphere, producing their own content and interacting with their peers” (Cammaerts, 2009, p.360).

Newspapers and Sense of Community

Gillmor (2004) addressed how the change in the dissemination of news has facilitated growth of communities. He argued that media outlets have been treating news as lectures. “We told you what the news was. You bought it, or you didn’t. Tomorrow’s news reporting and production will be more of a conversation, or a seminar.” (Gillmor, 2004, p.XXIV). The author predicted that the lines between producers and consumers will continue to blur, making the news organization itself a medium for everyone’s voice. According to Gillmor (2004), the change from journalism as lecture to journalism as a conversation will affect every community of interest. He claimed that everyone, from news managers and journalists to the people covered, to sources and the existing audience, must change their ways.

According to the findings of Meyer (2009), the success of news media is dependent on the extent of their influence in the community they serve. These findings are based on evidence from geographical communities, but can according to Meyer also be extended to non-geographic communities as well. Meyer further claimed that influence is earned by trust and that trust depends on quality. He stated “if the traditional public service functions of newspapers are to be served by (...) new media forms, the creators of those will benefit by understanding those essential causal links: quality to trust to influence to sustainable profit” (Meyer, 2009, p.2).

The Washington Post picture editor Keith W. Jenkins saw promise for newspaper blogs in the historical ties among journalism, community and civic discourse. According to him, the Internet is an extension of our human desire for community. He argued that the newsrooms need to value this by using the Web as a tool for communication. “We need to develop a culture in our newsrooms that lets us become part of the conversation that is already taking place; not as a dominant voice

but as one of many. By giving up our position on high we may gain an even higher respect in the communities we live in” (as quoted in Dailey, Demo & Spillman 2008, p.54).

Civic Participation

As mentioned earlier, Mersey (2009) stated that there is a “virtuous cycle linking newspapers readership to a sense of community in a manner that enhances social capital, the interwoven fabric of social connections that results in cooperation, trustworthiness and civic participation” (p.105). According to Putnam (2000), sense of community and social networks comprise social capital. He argued that the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Social contact affects the productivity of individuals and groups. “Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arise from them” (Putnam 2000, p.19). He further stated that social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect. It can be individual connections that cater to our own interests or networks that affect the wider community. “Social capital can thus be simultaneously a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good’” (Putnam 2000, p.20).

Chavis & Wandersman (1990) stated that sense of community can have a catalytic effect on citizen participation in community organizations. According to them, an individual’s participation in community building is influenced by three components: the perception of the environment, one’s social relations, and one’s perceived control and empowerment within the community. They further postulated that sense of community functions as a catalyst in mobilizing these components. They claimed that “the building of a sense of community acts as a mechanism to stimulate

the healthy development of the environment and the people who inhabit it” (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990, p. 56).

Hartelius (2005) argued “the scholarly study of blogs invokes issues of social community, public and political participation, and the processes by which marginalized persons and groups express and disseminate ideas” (p.74). She stated that advocates of participation in virtual communities focus on new possibilities for activism and social and political participation in ways that are less limited by geography. They suggest that online communication and communities can stimulate such participation in several ways. In their study, Katz, Rice & Aspden (2001) found that “Internet users were more likely than nonusers to engage in traditional political activity in the 1996 general election, including voting, and the Internet provided a platform for a significant amount of additional forms of political activity” (p.416).

Putnam (2000) argued that newspaper readership remains a mark of substantial civic engagement. He claimed that newspaper readers are older, more educated, and more rooted in their communities than the average American. “Compared to demographically identical nonreaders, regular newspaper readers belong to more organizations, participate more actively in clubs and civic associations, attend local meetings more frequently, vote more regularly, volunteer and work on community projects more often, and even visit with friends more frequently and trust their neighbors more” (Putnam 2000, p.218).

According to Kushin (2009), the introduction of new media technologies such as blogs has revolutionized the civic lives of young adults. “Integral shifts in how young adults acquire information and how they go about taking action reflect this fundamental change, demonstrating entirely new manners of democratic engagement” (Kushin 2009, p.26). He emphasized that to see civic involvement and Internet use as

entirely separate activities is an oversimplification that ignores these interwoven interactions. Furthermore, he suggested the examination of specific forms of media use as manifestations of civic life.

Theoretical Position

Definition of Community

In order to examine the creation of community and sense of community, it is necessary to establish a workable definition of community. According to Hartelius (2005), a community is generally created through identification among members and difference to outsiders. She stated

“The members of a community identify with one another while recognizing internal differences. Identification can be grounded in shared physical space (...) or more organically, in a “community of interest”, wherein one goal or focus drives social cohesion. At its core, community is a designation of commonality and/or shared experience” (Hartelius, 2005, p.73).

According to Anderson (1983), “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (p.6). A national community, for example, is imagined because the members will never meet most of their fellow-members, yet they all have an image of a their communion in their minds. Consequently, an imagined community differs from a tangible community due to the fact that the members do not interact on a face-to-face basis. Based on this definition, we can identify blogs as imagined communities. The way in which they are imagined can be used to distinguish these communities. The community of a nation is imagined as limited because it has fixed boundaries. Beyond these boundaries lie other nations. It is also imagined as sovereign because no other nation can claim authority over it.

Anderson (1983) stated that the creation of imagined communities was enabled by print-capitalism. It “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think of themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson, 1983, p.36). The development of “print-as-commodity” is the key to the idea of people performing acts simultaneously. One of these acts is reading newspapers. Anderson (1983) recognized the daily newspaper as an important vehicle for the rise of the modern nation-state and a national sense of community. He described the action of reading a newspaper as “an extraordinary mass ceremony” (Anderson, 1983, p.35). More importantly, the reader “is well aware it is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson, 1983, p.35). This act is repeated on a daily basis. Consequently, the author asked what more vivid figure for the secular imagined community could be envisioned? Furthermore, Anderson (1983) stated that newspapers create “that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (Anderson, 1983, p.36). Although Anderson (1983) concerned himself with the rise of nationalism and its particular version of an imagined community, it is a promising framework for analyzing and describing the features of any given community.

According to Anderson (1983) the nation is imagined as a community because its members perceive it as a deep, horizontal comradeship. This can be linked to McMillan & Chavis’ (1986) four dimensions of community. According to the two authors, there are two major uses for the term community. The first is the geographical notion of community, such as a neighborhood or city. The second is the relational notion, such as the quality of human relationships regardless of location. For the purpose of this study, the researcher employed the latter usage. As pointed out by

the authors, “modern society develops communities around interests and skills more than around locality” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.8).

Sense of Community

One way to examine community is to measure sense of community. Blanchard (2004) claimed that McMillan & Chavis (1986) have the most well-regarded and well-researched conceptualization of sense of community. They defined sense of community as “a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). According to them, this definition applies equally to all types of communities because of their common core. Consequently, their theoretical framework has the potential for a broad range of applications. Their proposed definition of sense of community consists of four dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

Membership

McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined membership “as the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (p.9). According to the authors, personal investment is an important catalyst for a person’s feeling of belonging to a group and sense of community. By investing time and effort to become part of a group, the membership will feel earned. As a consequence of this personal investment, the membership will be more meaningful.

Another important element is a common symbol system, which serves to both create and maintain a sense of community. McMillan & Chavis (1986) stated, “understanding common symbols systems is prerequisite to understanding community” (p.10).

Influence

Influence is the “sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group or of the group mattering to its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). According to the authors, members are more attracted to a community in which they feel they are influential. Additionally, they claimed that cohesiveness is dependent on a group’s ability to influence its members to conform. Consequently, “both conformity and community influence on members indicate the strength of the bond” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). This reach for conformity stems from the need of both the individuals and the community for consensual validation. The consensual validation construct assumes that “people possess an inherent need to know that the things they see, feel, and understand are experienced in the same way by others” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.11).

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

Integration and fulfillment of needs is “the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). This dimension is also called reinforcement. “Reinforcement as a motivator of behavior is a cornerstone in behavioral research, and it is obvious that for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.12). According to the authors, there are several reinforcers that can create a sense of community among people. One is the status that comes with being a member. If individual members experience a group as being successful, it can bring them closer together. Another reinforcer is the competence of others. McMillan & Chavis (1986) claimed that “people are attracted to others whose skills or competences can benefit them in some way” (p.13). Their main point was that people do what serves their

needs. Consequently, the mentioned reinforcements are directed by shared values. The authors claimed that when people with shared values join together, they experience similar needs, priorities, and goals. This fosters a belief that by coming together, these needs will be met and the reinforcements they seek will be obtained. Consequently, shared values function as an integrative element for cohesive communities.

Shared Emotional Connection

Emotional connection is “the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). According to the authors, the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close. Also, the more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond will be. The level of importance of shared events to those involved will also affect the community bond. The authors concluded that “strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.14).

Empirical Measure of Sense of Community

Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman (1986) developed the Sense of Community Index (SCI) as a way to operationalize and measure sense of community. According to them, the SCI allows for “the determination of the relative influence of various factors on the judgment of sense of community” (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman, 1986, p.24). The main objective for the development of the index was to validate sense of community as an empirically significant construct. In their study, they found “a commonly held perception of sense of community and that the four

elements of sense of community offered by McMillan (1976) adequately explain that perception” (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman, 1986, p.24).

The SCI consists of twelve true or false items. These items were chosen to represent perceptions of sense of community in terms of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection. The index was originally intended to measure the sense of community in a residential setting, but has been proven applicable for investigations in different settings as well. Appendix A illustrates the index items as developed by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman (1986).

As pointed out by Mercy (2009), McMillan & Chavis’ (1986) definition of sense of community, generally, and the SCI, specifically, have been used extensively to examine mass media. A study conducted by Chipuer & Pretty (1999) reviewed the reliability of SCI and concluded that the index is a good foundation to be used when measuring sense of community. According to them, research has demonstrated that the SCI can accommodate examinations in different settings. It is also convenient to administer in survey studies. This was done by Blanchard (2004) when she conducted a study to survey blog reader’s sense of community using the SCI index. She applied the SCI questionnaire, but changed the word “block” to “blog”. The reliability of the revised SCI was confirmed by a Cronbach’s alpha value of .72. Appendix B illustrates the index items as revised by Blanchard (2004).

Research Questions

Due to the fact that the blogging culture is still in its developing stage, sufficient empirical research to measure the effects of this phenomenon on journalism and its audience does not exist. Chung, Eunseong, Trammell & Porter (2007) suggested further research on journalism and blogs, “as blogs are increasingly becoming important informational and communication tools for journalism professionals and the

general news audience” (p.317).

The literature review indicates that there is a possible connection between newspaper blogs and sense of community. The audience’s sense of community deriving from newspaper blogs can be used as an indication of the effect of how blogging is being integrated into traditional journalism. However, few studies have examined newspaper blogs from the readers’ perspective. Only a few studies so far have researched if these blogs may create a sense of community among the readers. In her study, Roger (2006) found that newspapers blogs fostered some sense of community among readers. Additionally, she found that a sense of community might convince people to visit the blogs more often. However, Mersey (2009) found that the Internet may not be as powerful in building a sense of community as the print edition. Because of the ever-changing nature of the Internet, online journalism and blogs, it is justified to further examine the state of the journalistic blogosphere at this point in time. This exploratory research can be used as a benchmark for further study into the ability of newspaper blogs to foster a sense of community among its readers and possibly influence their reading behavior. The following two research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs foster a sense of community among readers?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between sense of community and reader behavior?

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter covers the research method employed in the study. It presents an overview of the overall implementation, as well as the participants, procedure, measures and data analysis. The *Houston Chronicle* news blogs formed the case of analysis for this study. The researcher conducted an online survey (see Appendix C) among the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs readers in order to examine if the blogs have fostered a sense of community, and whether there was a relationship between sense of community and reader behavior. The study consisted of twelve statements to measure sense of community, as well as questions about reading behavior and demographics.

The justification for using an online survey for this study can be found in the relevant literature. According to Frey, Botan & Kreps (2000), surveys are used “to ask questions about the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of respondents for the purpose of describing both the characteristics of those respondents and the population(s) they were chosen to represent” (p.198). As such, survey was an appropriate method to examine the proposed research questions for this study. Furthermore, the evaluative nature of the research project supported the use of survey. “Surveys are often used to evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs or products by enquiring about audience members’ and customers’ experiences and feelings” (Frey, Botan & Kreps 2000, p.201).

Because the sample frame being studied was part of a bigger population of

Internet users, it made sense to use an online survey. However, it did involve certain possible limitations. According to Couper (2000), “coverage error is the biggest threat to inference from Web surveys, at least to groups beyond those defined by access to or use of the Web” (p.467). However, due to the fact that the target population of this study was narrowly defined as the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs, coverage was not much of a problem in this study. An important aspect to keep in mind whenever researchers attempt to survey Internet users is that the sample is representative for people with Internet access and not the population in general. According to Couper (2000), “given that Web access is not universal and no frame of Web users exist, the best way to achieve probability-based Web samples is to restrict the sample to those with Web access, thereby restricting the population of interest” (p.484-485).

It is important to note that the results of the study enabled the researcher to make inferences about the population reading the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. No generalizations are made about the public at large. The study only produced exploratory research. As such, the researcher looked for data indications rather than causality. Causality cannot be assumed based on correlation. As pointed out by Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000), “survey research typically establishes noncausal relationships among variables” (p.203).

Participants

The participants of the study were readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Due to the way in which the participants were recruited, the sample was a purposive sample. “In a purposive sample, respondents are nonrandomly selected on the basis of a particular characteristic” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p.132). In the case of this survey, respondents were recruited on the basis of being readers of the *Houston*

Chronicle news blogs. They were sampled through e-mail invitations with a link to the survey, as well as a link to the survey posted on the *Houston Chronicle* website.

Survey procedure

A self-administered online survey of the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs was conducted. The survey consisted of two sections and should have taken no longer than ten to fifteen minutes to complete. Consent information was given at the beginning of the survey and individuals completed the survey on a voluntary basis. Data collection was done using an online survey at a survey hosting website, surveymonkey.com.

First, the researcher invited readers to participate in the study. These participants were identified through the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Any reader who posted a comment and left a valid e-mail address between November 2010 and January 2011 was contacted by e-mail and invited to fill out the survey. To avoid multiple completions, the SurveyMonkey software only allowed for one response per email. 150 emails were sent out and 25 responses were received. This constituted a response rate of 16.6%.

Secondly, anyone reading the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs was invited to participate in the study. With the help of the *Houston Chronicle*, the researcher posted a link on the newspaper's website. The link was open for one week. This provided an equal opportunity for anyone reading the blogs to participate in the survey, resulting in a self-selected sample. The link on the website generated 98 responses, making the total number of responses to the survey 123. As an incentive, all participants were informed that by responding to the survey, they were included in the drawing of a \$50 Starbucks gift card. The gift card was drafted and distributed after the closing of the survey.

Measures

The emergence of blogs as part of newspapers' online offerings has sparked debate and research into the attitudes of journalists and newspaper managers concerning this relatively new phenomenon. However, little effort has been made so far to assess the possible effects these blogs have on the readers. To address this, the larger concept of sense of community was explored among the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Furthermore, the sense of community was correlated to the respondents' reading behavior.

The survey was partly adapted from the studies of Roger (2006) and Mersey (2009). In the first section, participants were tested using the SCI developed by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman (1986) to determine their sense of community. They responded to twelve statements using close-ended Likert scales with options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A 6th option of *Don't know / Not applicable* was also added. The statements functioned as instruments to measure the four dimensions of sense of community defined by McMillan & Chavis (1986); membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The statements were adapted to the purpose of this study, with the term "blog" replacing terms like "neighborhood" or "block" where necessary. This revision of the index was proven to be valid in Blanchard's (2004) study on blogs and sense of community. Appendix B illustrates the twelve revised index items. The revised index included statements such as "I feel at home on this blog", "I have no influence over what this blog is like" and "It is very important to me to read this particular blog". In order to determine the reliability of these items to measure the single construct of sense of community, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The result was a Cronbach's alpha of .67. This was a slightly lower value than desired. However,

if the statement “Very few of the other blog readers know me” was deleted, the index received a Cronbach’s alpha value of .72. Consequently, this item was removed from the data analysis.

In the second section, participants were asked questions about their reader behavior to determine their activeness as an audience. This was measured with dimensions such as how often the readers visit the blogs, how often they comment on blog posts and how often they read the print version of the newspaper. Additionally, their general relationship to blogs was also be measured using questions such as whether they wrote a blog themselves and if they visit other blogs than the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. Furthermore, their attitude toward blogs as a tool for newspapers to reach their readers and for the readers to connect with each other was measured. To do so, the participants were asked to respond to two statements: “I see blogs as an efficient tool for newspapers to reach their readers” and “I see blogs as an efficient tool for me to connect with other newspapers readers.”

The results of these questions were used to measure the sense of community among the readers and examine possible correlations between sense of community and reading behavior. The purpose of examining the relationship between these two variables further supported the use of survey as research method for this study. “Researchers often use survey responses to describe the communication characteristics of a population and to assess the relationships between communication and other behavior” (Frey, Botan & Kreps 2000, p.202). Finally, participants also filled out standard demographic questions about gender, age, education level, socio-economic status and voter registration.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the results of the study enabled the researcher to make

inferences about the population reading the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. The researcher could not make any generalizations about the public at large. The study only produced exploratory research and the results were used to search for data indications rather than causality. The first research question addressed the potential of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs to foster a sense of community among the readers. To measure sense of community, the participants were asked to respond to twelve statements using a 6-point Likert scale. 1 represented the lowest sense of community and 5 the highest. The value 6 was a *Don't know / Not applicable* option and did not convey any degree of sense of community. Eight of the statements were positive and four were negative. To compensate for this, the researcher reverse-coded the four negative statements. This way, high scores indicated positive responses to all of the statements. The 6th option *Don't know / Not applicable* was recoded into the value 0, as this response did not imply any specific level of sense of community. In order to determine a score for the index, the mean of each statement was calculated. Furthermore, the mean of the 11 mean values was calculated.

In order to determine the dispersion of participants with high or low sense of community, the SCI was calculated into a new index with the value 0 representing a low sense of community and the value 1 representing a high sense of community. To do this, each SOC variable was recalculated into a different variable. The values 1-3.0 represented 0, meaning low sense of community. The value 3 was included because *Neutral* did not convey a high sense of community. The values 3.0-5 represented 1, which represented a high sense of community. The scores from each sense of community variable were added. The highest possible score was 11, the lowest possible score was 0. The mean of the scores was 6.7 (SD = .47). This mean was used as the midpoint for further calculation. The value of 6.7 thru the lowest score were

given a value of 0. The value of 6.7 thru the highest score were given a value of 1. Again, 0 represented a low sense of community, while 1 represented a high sense of community.

The second research question asked if there is a relationship between sense of community and reader behavior. In order to examine this potential relationship, the variables of reading behavior and sense of community were subjected to correlation testing. “To determine statistical correlation between two variables, researchers calculate two things: (a) a correlation coefficient, which indicates the type and strength of the relationship between the variables; and (b) a coefficient of determination, which indicates how much one variable can be explained by the other variable” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p.359). Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient, expressed by the r -value, was used to indicate whether a possible correlation existed or not. Again, it is important to note that correlation did not mean causality.

Once the correlation coefficient was computed, it was subjected to significance testing. The purpose of the significance testing was to determine the probability that any correlation was real and did not occur only by chance. This significance was expressed by the p value. In communication research, the significance level is usually set to .05 (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999). This means that any correlation with a p value higher than .05 would be rejected. However, the authors pointed out that exploratory research will sometimes use a significance level of .10 in order to see if the suspected relationship is worth further pursuing in follow-up studies. Consequently, this study considered findings at the .10 level as marginally significant.

Furthermore, linear regression was performed to make predictions about the relationship between reader behavior and the experienced sense of community.

“Besides investigating whether variables are related, many researchers wish to predict or explain how people are likely to score on a criterion, or outcome, variable on the basis of their scores on another variable. Statistical procedures used to make such predictions are referred to as regression analysis” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p.369-370). The authors identified linear regression as a tool to predict or explain scores on a dependent variable on the basis of obtained scores on an independent variable. This provided the researcher with gained knowledge of the relationship between the two variables. Finally, to further analyze and describe the relationship between the sense of community and reading behavior, the distribution between sense of community type (high or low) and the various reading behaviors was calculated by using cross tabulation and chi-square testing.

To further deepen the understanding of sense of community and blog use, the researcher chose to also analyze the relationship between sense of community and the participant’s demographics. In order to determine a possible connection, the relevant variables were subjected to correlation and regression analysis, as well as cross tabulation and chi-square testing.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter examines the participants' sense of community and the potential relationship between sense of community and reading behavior based on the findings of the study. The results of the survey were used to look for possible correlations. First, descriptive statistics of the demographics of the participants were given, as well as of their sense of community and reader behavior. Then, the researcher explored the potential relationship between the two latter variables. Finally, the relationship between sense of community and demographics was analyzed.

Demographics

The participants were largely male dominated, with 84% (N = 104) males and 16% (N = 19) females. The age groups 45 to 55 years and 55 years or older were pervasive, with a total of 80 (64.8%) participants. The age group 18-25 years only constituted 3.3% (N = 4) of the respondents. In regards to education, 65.5% (N = 81) of the respondents had an undergraduate or graduate degree. Additionally, the majority was employed full-time (69.7%, N = 86), while the other significant group was retired (17.1%, N = 21). Students only represented 3.3% (N = 4) of the respondents. The high academic level was also reflected in the respondents' income level. The highest income group (\$75,000 or more) was also the largest (36.9%, N = 46). However, 27% (N = 33) of the respondents did not wish to disclose this information. 91% (N = 112) of the respondents were registered to vote in their election district. A summary of the demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	104	84%
Female	19	16%
Age		
18-25 years old	4	3.3
25-35 years old	17	13.8
35-45 years old	22	17.9
45-55 years old	38	30.9
55 or older	42	33.9
Education		
High School	9	7.3
Some college or university	25	20.3
Undergraduate degree	38	30.5
Graduate degree	43	35
Ph.D.	8	6.5
Current job situation		
Employed full-time	86	69.7
Employed part-time	5	4.1
Retired	21	17.1
Unemployed	5	4.1
Student	4	3.3
Other	3	1.6

Income		
\$15,000 or less	4	3.3
\$15,000 to \$45,000	19	15.7
\$45,000 to \$75,000	21	17.1
\$75,000 or higher	46	36.9
I do not wish to disclose this information	33	27
Voter registration		
Yes	112	91
No	6	4.9
I do not wish to disclose this information	4	4.1

Sense of Community

With 1 being the lowest value for sense of community and 5 being the highest, the mean of the sense of community index was calculated to 3.57 (SD = 0.65). When analyzing the dispersion of participants between high and low sense of community, 77 participants (62.6%) experienced a high sense of community, while 46 participants (37.4%) experienced a low sense of community. These results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Sense of Community Type

SOC Type	Frequency	Percentage
Low Sense of Community	46	37.4
High Sense of Community	77	62.6
Total	123	

Reading Behavior

When it comes to the print version of the *Houston Chronicle*, 41.8% (N = 51) of the participants responded that they rarely or never read it. 14.8% (N = 18) subscribe seven days a week and 11.5% (N = 14) subscribe only on weekends. Of the non-subscribers, 4.9% (N = 6) read it regularly, while 18% (N = 22) read it occasionally.

Table 3. Frequency of Use of the Print Version of the *Houston Chronicle*

How do you use the print version of the <i>Houston Chronicle</i>?	Frequency	Percentage
I subscribe 7 days a week	18	14.8
I subscribe on weekends	14	11.5
I read it regularly, but don't subscribe	6	4.9
I read it occasionally, but don't subscribe	22	18
I rarely or never read it	51	41.8
Don't know / Not applicable	11	9
Total	123	100

However, when measuring visits to the *Houston Chronicle* Website, 84.4% (N =

103) participants responded that they visit the site daily. 8.2% (N = 10) visit weekly, while only 4.1% (N = 5) visit monthly or less.

Table 4. Frequency of Visits to the *Houston Chronicle* Website

How often do you visit the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> website?	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	103	84.4
Weekly	10	8.2
Monthly	2	1.6
Less than every month	5	4.1
Don't know / Not applicable	2	1.6
Total	123	100

When asked about the history of their readership of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs, the large majority (87%, N = 107) had read the blogs for more than a year. 5.7% (N = 7) had read them between a month and six months, while 4.9% (N = 6) had read them between six months to a year. None of the respondents had read the blogs for less than a month.

Table 5. History of Reading the *Houston Chronicle* News Blogs

How long have you read the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blogs?	Frequency	Percentage
Less than a month	0	0
Between a month and six months	7	5.7
Six months to a year	6	4.9
More than a year	107	87.7
Don't know / Not applicable	2	1.6
Total	123	100

Again, when asked about visit frequency, 83.6% (N = 102) responded that they visit the blogs daily. 13.8% (N = 17) visit weekly, while only 0.8% (N = 1) visit monthly.

Table 6. Frequency of Visits to the *Houston Chronicle* News Blogs

How often do you visit these blogs?	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	102	83.6
Weekly	17	13.8
Monthly	1	0.8
Less than every month	0	0
Don't know / Not applicable	2	1.6
Total	123	100

When asked which *Houston Chronicle* news blog they read most often, 57.7%

(N = 71) answered the *TechBlog by Dwight Silverman*. Another 17.1% (N = 21) answered the *SciGuy: A science blog with Eric Berger*. Only 3.3% (N = 4) responded to visit the *Newswatch: Breaking News* blog the most. Additionally, the *TechBlog by Dwight Silverman* was the blog that the most readers (39.8%, N = 49) commented on most frequently. The *SciGuy: A science blog with Eric Berger* was mostly commented on by 9.8% (N = 12) of the respondents. However, 30.1% (N = 37) of the respondents chose the *Don't know/Not applicable* option.

When asked about their relationship with blogs in general, 80.5% (N = 99) responded that they regularly visit other blogs than the Houston Chronicle news blogs. However, only 22% (N = 26) responded that they write a blog themselves. When asked to respond to the statement “I see blogs as an efficient tool for newspapers to reach their readers”, a significant majority (85.4%, N = 105) agreed or strongly agreed. Only 0.8% (N = 1) strongly disagreed. Also when asked to respond to the statement “I see blogs as an efficient tool for me to connect with other newspapers readers” the majority (64.2%, N = 79) responded with agreement. However, an increased percentage (10.6%, N = 13) disagreed with this statement. Additionally, 22.8% (N = 28) responded to be neutral to the statement.

Relationship Between Sense of Community and Reader Behavior

A summary of the correlations between sense of community and reading behavior can be found in Table 7. When subjected to correlation analysis, the relationship between sense of community and the use of the print version of the *Houston Chronicle* showed no significant correlation ($r = 0.15$ (122), $p = .083$). When the variable measuring the use the print version of the *Houston Chronicle* was compared to the sense of community types by using cross tabulation and chi-square testing, no significant relationship was found either, χ^2 (5, N = 122) = 5.74, $p = .219$).

The participants with a high sense of community reported to be the most avid readers of the print version of the *Houston Chronicle*. 16% (N = 13) with high sense of community reported to subscribe to the newspaper 7 days a week. 11% (N = 5) of the participants with a low sense of community reported the same. However, a large group from each type reported to rarely or never read it. Of the participants with a high sense of community, 37% (N = 29) reported to rarely or never read the print version. Of those with low sense of community, 48% (N = 22) reported to rarely or never read the print version of the newspaper.

The relationship between sense of community and frequency of visits on the *Houston Chronicle* website showed a highly significant correlation ($r = 0.312$ (122), $p = .000$). Furthermore, the regression analysis showed that the sense of community slightly predicted the frequency of visits to the website (R squared = .097 (121), $p = .000$). 9.7% of the variation in frequency of visits to the *Houston Chronicle* website could be determined by the sense of community, while 81% of the variation could be caused by something else. The cross tabulation and chi-square test also showed a significant relationship between the two variables, χ^2 (4, N = 122) = 6.88, $p = .002$). Of those with a high sense of community, 84.4% (N = 69) report to visit the website daily. Of those with a low sense of community, 75% (N = 34) visit it daily. 4% (N = 2) of participants with a low sense of community reported to visit the website less than every month, while 3.9% (N = 3) of participants with high sense of community reported the same.

The relationship between sense of community and frequency of visits to the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs showed no significant correlation ($r = .123$ (122), $p = .176$). When subjected to cross tabulation and chi-square testing, no significant relationship was found either, χ^2 (3, N = 122) = 4.29, $p = .231$). 88% (N = 68) of the

participants with a high sense of community reported to visit the blogs daily, while 10% (N = 8) visit them weekly. 75% (N = 34) of the participants with a low sense of community visit them daily, while 20% (N = 9) visit them weekly.

The relationship between sense of community and how long the participants had read the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs showed a significant correlation ($r = .201$ (122), $p = .026$). The regression analysis showed that how long the participants have read the news blogs could be slightly explained by the sense of community (R squared = .041 (121), $p = .026$). The cross tabulation and chi-square testing confirmed this relationship, χ^2 (3, N = 122) = 11.11, $p = .001$). None of the participants from either group reported to have read the blogs for less than one month. Of the participants with high sense of community, 93% (N = 72) reported to have read them for more than a year. Of those with low sense of community, 77% (N = 35) reported the same. Of those with high sense of community, 3.9% (N = 3) reported to have read the blogs for less than a year. 22% (N = 10) of those with low sense of community reported the same.

Neither of the variables measuring which *Houston Chronicle* news blogs the participants read or commented on most often showed any significant correlation with sense of community. No significant relationship between the blog they read most often ($r = .030$ (122), $p = .744$) and sense of community can be established. The cross tabulation and chi-square testing supported these findings, χ^2 (12, N = 122) = 16.46, $p = .171$) The analysis illustrated that of all the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs, the blog *Techblog* by Dwight Silverman attracted the highest number of readers both among the participants with low and high sense of community. The second most popular blog was *SciGuy: A science blogs with Eric Berger*.

Additionally, no relationship between which blog the participants commented

on most often and sense of community could be established ($r = -.030$ (122), $p = .746$). When comparing sense of community and the blogs on which participants commented the most, the cross tabulation and chi-square testing also failed to find a significant relationship, χ^2 (12, $N = 122$) = 28.18, $p = .005$). The analysis showed some differences between participants with low and with high sense of community. Again, the most popular blog to comment on among participants from both types of sense of community was *Techblog* by Dwight Silverman. However, 42.2% ($N = 19$) of the participants with low sense of community chose the *Don't know / Not applicable* option for this question, compared to 23.3% ($N = 18$) of the participants with high sense of community.

The relationship between the sense of community and visits to other blogs than the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs proved to have no significant correlation ($r = -.044$ (122), $p = .632$). When subjected to cross tabulation and chi-square testing, no significant relationship was found either, χ^2 (1, $N = 122$) = 1.42, $p = .233$). 77% ($N = 60$) of those with high sense of community reported to regularly visit other blogs than the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. 86% ($N = 39$) of those with low sense of community reported the same.

Whether the participants wrote their own blog proved to have a significant correlation to the sense of community ($r = .322$ (122), $p = .000$). The regression analysis showed that whether the respondents had their own blog could be slightly predicted by the sense of community (R squared = .104 (121), $p = .000$). When subjected to cross tabulation and chi-square testing, this significant relationship was confirmed, χ^2 (1, $N = 122$) = 8.62, $p = .003$). 13% ($N = 10$) of those with high sense of community write their own blog, while 35% ($N = 16$) of those with low sense of community do the same.

The relationship between the sense of community and the participants' attitudes toward blogs as an efficient tool to for newspapers to reach their readers had no significant correlation ($r = .012$ (122), $p = .896$). Cross tabulation and chi-square testing also failed to find a significant relationship, χ^2 (5, N = 122) = 7.21, $p = .205$. 45% (N = 35) of those with high sense of community strongly agreed that blogs are an efficient tool for newspapers to reach their readers. 35% (N = 16) of those with low sense of community did the same. 6% (N = 3) of those with low sense of community disagreed, with a corresponding 1.3% (N = 1) of those with high sense of community.

The relationship between the sense of community and the participants' attitude toward blogs as an efficient tool to connect with other newspaper readers had a marginally significant correlation ($r = .153$ (122), $p = .093$) The regression analysis showed that the blog attitude could be slightly predicted by the sense of community (R squared = .023 (121), $p = .093$). The cross tabulation and chi-square testing showed the same marginally significant relationship, χ^2 (4, N = 122) = 11.51, $p = .011$. 35% (N = 26) of those with high sense of community see blogs as an efficient tool to connect with other newspaper readers, while 15% (N = 19) of those with low sense of community do the same. 17% (N = 8) of those with low sense of community disagreed with the statement, while 6% (N = 5) of those with high sense of community did the same.

Table 7. Correlations between Sense of Community and Reading Behavior

	Sense of Community
How do you use of the print version of the <i>Houston Chronicle</i>?	$r = 0.15 (122), p = .083$
How often do you visit the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> website?	$r = 0.312 (122), p = .000$
How often do you visit the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blogs?	$r = .123 (122), p = .176$
How long have you read the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blogs?	$r = .201 (122), p = .026$
Which <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blog do you read the most often?	$r = .030 (122), p = .744$
Which <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blog do you comment the most often?	$r = -.030 (122), p = .746$
Do you regularly visit other blogs that the <i>Houston Chronicle</i> news blogs?	$r = -.044 (122), p = .632$
Do you write a blog yourself?	$r = .322 (122), p = .000$
“I see blogs as an efficient tool for newspapers to reach readers”	$r = .012 (122), p = .896$
I see blogs as an efficient tool to connect to other newspaper readers”	$r = .153 (122), p = .093$

Relationship Between Sense of Community and Demographics

A summary of the correlations between sense of community and demographics can be found in Table 8. When subjected to correlation analysis, the relationship between sense of community and the participants' gender showed no significant relationship ($r = .046$ (122), $p = .611$). When comparing the two variables, cross tabulation and chi-square also failed to find a significant relationship, $\chi^2(1, N = 122) = .26$, $p = .608$). Male participants dominated both types of sense of community. Among both male and female participants, the majority reported to have a high sense of community.

The relationship between sense of community and age did not show a significant relationship either ($r = .001$ (122), $p = .995$). This was also confirmed by the cross tabulation and chi-square testing, $\chi^2(4, N = 122) = 1.38$, $p = .847$). Both the low and high sense of community groups are dominated by participants who are 55 years old or older. The number of participants decreased exponentially with the decrease in age, making 18-25 years the age group with the fewest participants both among the low and high sense of community.

Academic degree did not appear to have a significant relationship with sense of community either ($r = -.131$ (122), $p = .149$). Cross tabulation and chi-square testing also failed to find a significant relationship, $\chi^2(4, N = 122) = 5.74$, $p = .219$). Among the participants with low sense of community, the majority (53.3%, $N = 24$) had a graduate or PhD degree. This academic level was less represented among the participants with high sense of community (35%, $N = 27$). Among the participants with high sense of community, the largest academic group (36.6%, $N = 28$) was participants with an undergraduate degree. These descriptive statistics show that the participants with low sense of community are slightly higher educated than the

participants with high sense of community.

The participants' current job situation showed no correlation to their sense of community ($r = -.077$ (122), $p = .402$). Cross tabulation and chi-square testing did not find a significant relationship either, χ^2 (5, $N = 122$) = 4.24, $p = .515$). The majority among both participants with low and high sense of community are currently employed full-time. The second largest group among both types of sense of community are the participants who are retired. Furthermore, the number of participants who are either employed part-time, students or unemployed were evenly distributed among the sense of community types.

No correlation was found between the participants' income and their sense of community ($r = -.106$ (122), $p = .245$) This was confirmed by the cross tabulation and chi-square testing, χ^2 (4, $N = 122$) = 1.90, $p = .753$). The biggest income group among both the participants with low and high sense of community was \$75,000 or more. The smallest income group for both types was also the lowest (\$15,000 or lower). Among the participants with low sense of community, 28.8% ($N = 13$) chose not to disclose this information. Among the participants with high sense of community, 25.9% ($N = 20$) chose to do the same.

Voter registration was the only demographic variable that showed a correlation with sense of community ($r = -.234$ (122), $p = .009$). The regression analysis showed that voter registration could be slightly predicted by the sense of community experienced on the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs (R squared = .047 (122), $p = .009$). This relationship was confirmed by the cross tabulation and chi-square testing, χ^2 (2, $N = 122$) = 6.88, $p = .032$). Participants who are registered to vote dominate both types of sense of community. However, a slightly higher percentage (8.8%, $N = 4$) of the participants with low sense of community are not registered to vote compared to

the participants with high sense of community (2.6%, N = 2).

Table 8. Correlation Between Sense of Community and Demographics

	Sense of Community
Gender	$r = .046 (122), p = .611$
Age	$r = .001 (122), p = .995$
Academic background	$r = -.131 (122), p = .149$
Current job situation	$r = -.077 (122), p = .402$
Annual income	$r = -.106 (122), p = .245$
Voter registration	$r = -.234 (122), p = .009$

CHAPTER V

Discussion & Conclusion

The following chapter presents a discussion and conclusion of the study. In the first part, the results of the study are summarized and discussed. In the second part, the limitations of the study are assessed and future research is proposed. The purpose of this study was to examine if the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs foster a sense of community among readers, and if so, whether there is a relationship between sense of community and reader behavior. The results of the research will be used to discuss these issues.

Summary of Findings

Demographics

The findings showed that the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs who responded to the survey are largely male and 45 years or older. They are employed full-time and highly educated. Additionally, they are registered voters. These results somewhat coincide with findings from research conducted by De Waal & Schoenbach (2010). In their study, they investigated the profile of the online-news audience. They found that online news users are mainly younger and more highly educated compared to other people. In comparison, this study found that the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs are highly educated. However, they were also found to mainly be 45 years or older, which does not identify them as a “younger audience”. These findings, however, are supported by current research conducted by Pew Research Center (2010), which found a decline in blog reading among young adults (ages 18-

29) and an increase in blog reading among adults 30 years and older. The research also found that the younger audience is increasingly turning to other social media such as Facebook and Twitter. This may indicate that we are already experiencing a shift away from blogs by the younger audience, while the somewhat older audience is increasingly turning to blogs as sources of information and news.

Sense of Community

The first objective of this study was to examine the sense of community among the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. To measure sense of community, the participants were asked to respond to twelve statements using a close-ended Likert scale. 1 represented the lowest sense of community and 5 the highest. In order to determine a score for the index, the total mean of the statements was calculated (3.57). With 1 being the lowest value for sense of community and 5 being the highest, the value of 3.57 indicated some sense of community among the participants. To further determine the dispersion of participants with high or low sense of community, the Sense of Community index was calculated into a new index separating the respondents into two groups with the value 0 representing a low sense of community and the value 1 representing a high sense of community. Overall, the results of this study found that the majority (77%) of the participants among the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs experienced a sense of community, hereby supporting the hypothesis that newspapers blogs have the ability to foster a sense of community among the readers.

Relationship Between Sense of Community and Reader Behavior

The second objective of the study was to explore whether or not there is a relationship between SOC and the participants' reading behavior. When measuring the reading behavior of the participants, the study found that almost half of the

participants (41.8 %) rarely or never read the print version of the *Houston Chronicle*. However, when it comes to the *Houston Chronicle* website, 84.4% responded that they visit the site daily. This illustrated that the participants of this study are more active online readers of the *Houston Chronicle* than readers of the print version. These findings also correspond with the results of De Waal & Schoenbach's (2010) study of online news users. Their findings suggested a significant decline in the use of print newspapers among online-news users. Additionally, this study found that the large majority of the respondents (87%) had read the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs for more than a year. None of the respondents had read the blogs for less than a month. Furthermore, 83.6% responded that they visit the blogs daily. These results suggested that the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs are mainly both active and loyal readers. This supports the findings of Schultz & Sheffer (2009). In their study on why newspapers should utilize blogs as part of their online offerings, they found that online content has value for newspapers in the form of enhanced coverage and brand loyalty.

Based on the results of this study, one can infer that the participants are more avid readers of the online version of the newspaper than the print. 14.8% reported to subscribe to the print version seven days a week, while 84.4% reported to visit the newspaper's website on a daily basis. As illustrated in the literature review, this is a sign of newspaper readers largely migrating to the online platform. Consequently, newspaper editors must think of new ways to maintain their readership. Given that the next generation is arguably more accustomed to reading news off of computer screens than in print, newspapers are wise in going online to connect with this audience. However, it is important not to forget those without Internet access or without interest to get online. As newspapers increasingly move online, the issue of the "digital

divide” may become more apparent. How will people without Internet access continue to stay as engaged and informed as the people with access? Are blogs only beneficial for the more technologically savvy part of the population? The findings in the analysis of the relationship between sense of community and blog preference and commenting support the posing of these questions. The results showed that of all the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs, the blog *Techblog* by Dwight Silverman attracted the highest number of readers both among the participants with low and high sense of community. This finding could indicate that the news blogs found on the *Houston Chronicle* website are most appealing to individuals who have an interest in technology. Furthermore, the results also found that a significantly larger percentage of the participants with low sense of community (42.2%) responded *Don't know / Not applicable* to the question about which blog they commented on most often, compared to the participants with high sense of community (23.3%). These findings could suggest that individuals with an interest in technology are also the most avid commentators on the news blogs and experience the highest sense of community. However, to fully explore this potential relationship, the researcher could have included additional questions to measure the readers' commenting activity in the survey used for this study.

Without any available data to determine the direction of causation to examine the relationship between sense of community and reader behavior, the analysis of this research focused on finding correlations of interest. Simple correlation tests showed that four relationships were statistically significant. The study found a slight but statistically significant positive correlation between sense of community and some of the reading behavior variables. Frequency of visits to the *Houston Chronicle* website, as well as how long the participants had read the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs were

positively correlated to sense of community. Additionally, whether the participants wrote their own blog and if they saw blogs as an efficient tool for newspapers as well as themselves to connect to readers and for themselves were positively correlated to sense of community. However, the participants' use of the print version of the *Houston Chronicle*, the frequency of visits to the news blogs and whether they regularly visit other blogs than these news blogs did not show any significant correlation to the sense of community. Again, the results indicate correlations between sense of community and reading behavior. However, they do not enable the researcher to make any inferences about the causation. In other words, increases in active reading behavior may be correlated to sense of community. However, further research would be needed to learn more about causation.

When discussing the results of this study, one cannot overlook the possibility that people may have other motivations for reading newspaper blogs than an experienced sense of community. As outlined in the literature review, blogs have contributed to a growing two-way communication model in the news industry. The potential of interactivity as presented by blogs provides the audience with increased options to choose from, as well as a platform on which to actually participate in the production of information and content. Blogs enable readers to connect with both the newspaper and other readers in new ways by facilitating the exchange of their own ideas, opinions and thoughts. As a result, blogs often become the scene of an array of differing points of views, feisty debates and invigorating discussions. Some people may be attracted to blogs not in spite of the fact that people on the blog do not share the same values (as stated in one of the items on the Sense of Community Index), but because of that. They could seek out blogs to access a large display of opinion and values, or simply to voice their own.

Relationship Between Sense of Community and Demographics

The findings showed no significant relationship between sense of community and the participants' gender, age, academic background, current job situation or annual income. However, the analysis found a significant correlation between sense of community and voter registration. According to the regression analysis, voter registration could be slightly predicted by the sense of community fostered by the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs. These findings support the claims of both Putnam (2000) and Meyer (2009) that the sense of community experienced from reading newspapers and newspaper blog can lead to a social capital that enhances the readers' civic participation and political engagement. This civic participation further manifests itself again in newspaper reading, hereby creating and reinforcing an inherent cycle between sense of community, social capital and civic participation.

Conclusion

Although the exact relationship between sense of community and reading behavior cannot be determined based on the findings of this study, the data enabled the researcher to make some suppositions. The results seemed to indicate that the readers with a high sense of community tend to read the print version of the *Houston Chronicle* more often than readers with a low sense of community. Additionally, they visit the *Houston Chronicle* website more often, as well as the news blogs. They are also the respondents who have read the blogs for the longest period of time. Even though the researcher cannot claim that a high sense of community causes a more active reading behavior, i.e. more frequent visits to the newspaper's website and blogs, as well as a more active usage of the print version of the newspaper, the findings seemed to suggest that there could be a connection. The results may well support the idea of an innate cycle where reading blogs creates a sense of community,

which again leads people to continue to read the blogs and visit the website.

The results of this study may also support Mersey's (2009) claim of a virtuous cycle between sense of community and civic participation, "linking newspaper readership to a sense of community in a manner that enhances social capital". (p.105) As the results show, the participants with the highest sense of community also reported to most frequently read the print version of the *Houston Chronicle* and visit the newspaper's website. According to Putnam (2000), one of the most important signs of civic participation and engagement is reading newspapers. As such, one may argue that sense of community could reinforce the reading of newspapers (both print and online), which again reinforces civic participation.

So what does this mean for the newspaper industry? In the advertising model for print newspapers, a large circulation means higher income from advertising. If newspaper blogs lead to more hits on the newspaper's website, they may also have the potential to increase these profits. Consequently, from a corporate standpoint, newspapers may need to come up with a new business model for blogging. In response to current technological developments and the audience's changing reading habits, newspapers should accommodate themselves to the Web both editorially and financially. As found in the study of Schultz & Sheffer (2009), online offerings can drive more traffic to newspaper websites. If blogs can become an essential part of people's everyday news and information acquisition, newspapers should find a way to capitalize on them.

In 2004, Bucy described online interactivity as the "Holy Grail" of audience outreach for newspapers. With the continuous development and availability of new media technology, newspapers are increasingly harnessing the interactive capabilities of the Web and of blogs in particular. This study has indicated that the *Houston*

Chronicle news blogs have succeeded in reaching readers and also fostered a sense of community among some of them. When it comes to newspapers maintaining their readership, this study cannot make a claim that a sense of community deriving from newspaper blogs will cause a more active and loyal reading behavior among the audience. However, based on this exploratory research, it can be suggested that a sense of community may lead the readers to increasingly visit both the newspaper website and blogs. As such, focusing on the Internet to reach readers and maintain readership should continue to be a strong driving force when it comes to innovating and developing the current newspaper industry.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study may result from an uncertain response rate. Because the total population of the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs is unknown, a response rate could not be determined. Additionally, those who chose to complete the survey may not be representative of the total population. However, this limitation is applicable to any survey.

According to Couper (2000), "It is generally agreed that the major sources of error in surveys include sampling, coverage, nonresponse, and measurement error, all of which must be evaluated relative to cost" (p.466). In a purposive sample, all respondents who hold the required characteristic are included. "The inclusion of any and all such respondents may produce a biased sample and, therefore, limit the generalizability of the findings" (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p.132). A probability sample could be recruited if the researcher had a complete list of all blog readers and then chose every *n*th person. This approach would be possible on websites that require registration in order to read blogs. However, this was not the case with the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs.

The limitation of nonresponse was not applicable to this study. As argued by Couper (2000), “For non-probability surveys the issue of nonresponse has little meaning” (p.475). However, the study may have been subject to measurement errors. “Measurement error simply stated is the deviation of the answers of respondents from their true values on the measure” (Couper, 2000, p.475). It could be due to respondents (lack of motivation, deliberate distortion, lack of understanding, etc.) or the surveys itself (technical difficulties, confusing wording, etc.) Because surveys are self-administered, there is no interviewer to explain confusing terms or keep the respondents motivated. However, the fact that the population frame of the study was the readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs contributed to justify the use of an online survey. As pointed out by Couper (2000), “survey quality is not an absolute but should be evaluated relative to other features of the design (such as accuracy, cost, timeliness, etc)” (p.466). In the case of this survey, the benefits to the method used were the low cost and the time it took to gather information.

Another limitation of the study was the use of an invitation to participate in the survey through an open web link. This approach does not protect against individuals submitting multiple responses. However, the researcher chose to include this data collection method in order to ensure enough responses. As mentioned earlier, the email invitations to participate in the survey only had a response rate of 16.6%. To avoid the use of the open invitation and self-selected sample, several newspaper could have been included to yield a larger number of email addresses and hereby a larger number of closed invitations.

One can also question whether the people participating in online surveys such as the one employed in this study represent the average Internet users, or if they are likely to be more active and technologically engaged individuals. If you are more

active online, are you then also more willing to participate in online surveys? It is possible that the less active readers of the *Houston Chronicle* news blogs chose not to participate in the study, which consequently only enabled the researcher to measure the most active individuals.

Future research

Based on the literature review, it is reasonable to assume that new media technologies are going to continue to develop and accelerate change. Seen as though online newspapers and newspaper blogs are still relatively new, they may need a generation or two to fully settle. As such, future research should continue to follow these changing media platforms and continuously assess the effects on the consumers as they mature into an online-preferring public. Longitudinal studies to measure this development over time would be beneficial. Additionally, one could expand this study to include more newspapers, as well as different sizes and types of communities for broader comparisons.

The trend of increasingly incorporating social media into newswork is already highly noticeable in the American media landscape. Therefore, there is much room for studies examining other types of social media than blogs as well. For instance, as Twitter is rapidly gaining new territory, a comparison between blogs and other forms of social media to compare the effectiveness of connecting with readers would be interesting. Are blogs the most efficient form of social media for newspapers, or are there better ways to reach the readers?

APPENDIX A

Sense of Community Index

1.	I think the block is a good place to live.
2.	People on this block do not share the same values.
3.	My neighbors and I want the same things from the block.
4.	I can recognize the names of most of the people who live on this block.
5.	I feel at home on this block.
6.	Very few of my neighbors know me.
7.	I care about what other people who live on this block think of my actions.
8.	I have no influence over what this block is like.
9.	If there is a problem on this block, people who live here can get it solved.
10.	It is very important to me to live on this block.
11.	People who live on this block generally don't get along with each other.
12.	I expect to live on this block for a long time.

APPENDIX B

Revised Sense of Community Index

1.	I think the blog is a good place for me to visit.
2.	People on this blog do not share the same values.
3.	Other readers and I want the same things from the blog.
4.	I can recognize the names of most of the people who comment on this blog.
5.	I feel at home on this blog.
6.	Very few of the blog readers know me.
7.	I care about what other blog readers think of my comments.
8.	I have no influence over what this blog is like.
9.	If there is a problem on this blog, people who live here read it could get it solved.
10.	It is very important to me to read this particular blog.
11.	People who read this blog generally don't get along with each other.
12.	I expect to read this blog for a long time.

APPENDIX C

Survey

Section one

The following questions will ask you about the blogs you have read on the Houston Chronicle website. When answering the questions, please think about the most recent blog that you have read or remember reading.

1. I think the blog is a good place for me to visit.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

2. I expect to read this blog for a long time.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

3. It is very important to me to read this particular blog.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

4. I feel at home on this blog.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

5. I can recognize the names of most of the people who comment on the blog.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

applicable

6. I care about what other readers think of my comments.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

7. If there is a problem on this blog, people who read it can get it solved.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

8. Other readers and I want the same things from this blog.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

9. Very few of the other blog readers know me.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

10. People who read this blog generally don't get along with each other.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

11. People on this blog do not share the same values.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

12. I have no influence over what this blog is like.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

Section two

In this section, we would like to know more about your relationship with the Houston Chronicle, the Houston Chronicle news blogs, and blogs in general. Additionally, we will ask you some demographic questions.

1. How do you use the print version of the Houston Chronicle?

I subscribe 7 days

I subscribe on weekends

I read it regularly, but don't subscribe

I read it occasionally, but don't subscribe

I rarely or never read it

Don't know/Not applicable

2. How often do you visit the Houston Chronicle Website?

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Less than every month

Don't know/Not applicable

3. How long have you read the Houston Chronicle news blogs?

Less than a month

Between a month and six months

Six months to a year

More than a year

Don't know/Not applicable

4. How often do you visit these blogs?

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Less than every month

Don't know/Not applicable

5. Which Houston Chronicle blog do you read most often?

Newswatch: Breaking News

Depth of Field: Chronicle photojournalists

Nick Anderson

Houston Politics: City Hall and Harris Co.

MedBlog: Cindy George and Todd Ackerman

Immigration Chronicles

Armed Source: Military matters with Lindsay Wise

Bayou City History: J.R. Gonzales

Culture Shauk: Zain Shauk

School Zone: Blogging education

SciGuy: A science blog with Eric Berger

TechBlog: Dwight Silverman

Loren Steffy

FuelFix

PrimeProperty: Nancy Sarnoff

Texas on the Potomac

Texas Politics: The Austin Bureau

HelpLine. Your computer problems solved with Jay Lee

Career Rescue: Kim Thompson

Cars & Trucks: Tim Spell

Don't know/Not applicable

6. Which Houston Chronicle blog do you comment on most often?

Newswatch: Breaking News

Depth of Field: Chronicle photojournalists

Nick Anderson

Houston Politics: City Hall and Harris Co.

MedBlog: Cindy George and Todd Ackerman

Immigration Chronicles

Armed Source: Military matters with Lindsay Wise

Bayou City History: J.R. Gonzales

Culture Shauk: Zain Shauk

School Zone: Blogging education

SciGuy: A science blog with Eric Berger

TechBlog: Dwight Silverman

Loren Steffy

FuelFix

PrimeProperty: Nancy Sarnoff

Texas on the Potomac

Texas Politics: The Austin Bureau

HelpLine. Your computer problems solved with Jay Lee

Career Rescue: Kim Thompson

Cars & Trucks: Tim Spell

Don't know/Not applicable

7. Do you regularly visit other blogs than the Houston Chronicle news blogs?

Yes

No

8. Do you write a blog yourself?

Yes

No

9. I see blogs as an efficient tool for newspapers to reach their readers.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

10. I see blogs as an efficient tool for me to connect with other newspapers readers.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know/Not applicable

11. What is your gender?

Male

Female

12. How old are you?

18-25

25-35

35-45

35-55

55 or older

13. What is your highest academic degree?

High School

Some college or university

Undergraduate

Graduate

PhD

Other

14. What is your current job situation?

Employed full-time

Employed part-time

Retired

Unemployed

Student

Other

15. What is your approximate income before tax?

\$15,000 or less

\$15,000 to \$45,000

\$45,000 to 75,000

\$75,000 or more

I do not wish to disclose this information

16. Are you registered to vote in your election district?

Yes

No

I do not wish to disclose this information

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