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Live the Local: Exploring the Relationship between Local News Media and Cities Undergoing Downtown Revitalization

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Live the Local: Exploring the Relationship between Local News Media and Cities Undergoing
Downtown Revitalization

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Abstract

The rise in suburban development has caused many downtowns across the United States to lose residents, businesses, attractions and community engagement. City officials and planners work to create policies, designs and urban development that help to revitalize downtowns. However, how do we bring people into our downtowns to live, work and play? That is where local news coverage can have an impact. The question arises: What can city officials, event organizers, business leaders do to foster a vibrant downtown? News outlets (e.g., television, print, digital) and their corresponding social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, can act as " megaphones " to share updates, stories, promote public events and disseminate information.

With qualitative research that includes in-depth interviews with city officials, nonprofit leaders, business owners, residents and former journalists we discover how city stakeholders in Rogers, Arkansas, use local television news outlets and their digital platforms to promote and showcase a thriving, yet changing downtown. This project seeks to give insight into how cities can use news reporters, and local media outlets to shape their image by looking through the lens of the revitalization efforts in downtown Rogers, Arkansas. Through these in-person interviews and past research, we find a unique public/private partnership and strategy that should include local news coverage and digital media as a critical component, to encourage people to “ live the local.”

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Introduction

The city of Rogers has grown by approximately 22% from 2010 to 2019, with its estimated population increasing from 56,109 to 68,669, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (QuickFacts Rogers, Arkansas, U.S. Census Bureau). In 2014, the Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce published “Vision 2030.” This included a strategic plan for the Rogers-Lowell area with a roadmap on how city leaders will address infrastructure improvements, economic development, and population growth, among other things (Market Street Services & Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

The “ Vision 2030” plan also included a section devoted to the future of downtown Rogers. As part of this plan, it was recommended that city leaders in Rogers cultivate a media strategy that included posting on its in-house social media accounts and alerting the local news media to story ideas, including new business, event announcements and infrastructure changes (Market Street Services & Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, 2014). They noted the importance of moving simultaneously in creating an economic development plan, focusing on urban planning, specifying enhancements to public amenities, and funding parks and recreation upgrades, while also broadcasting these changes to the community through the media.

As a local news journalist in Northwest Arkansas, I have covered many stories concerning the changes in downtown Rogers. As a downtown resident, I have witnessed the revitalization and improvements that have been made since the release of the “ Vision 2030” master plan. This study intends to better understand the role that local news media plays as an outsider looking in - from an insider’s perspective. In this project, I review past research on the impact of local news media and how people respond to hyperlocal stories shared by local news

outlets – on television, online and on social media. By reviewing the history of Rogers, specifically looking at the evolution of the downtown area and analyzing the interviews from city leaders, community partners, business owners, and former journalists, this project provides a deeper understanding of the partnership between cities and local media. Furthermore, the conclusion will include ideas and recommendations on how other cities, municipalities and stakeholders can use *both* local news outlets *and* social/digital platforms in creating a dual media strategy to restore the public's interest in downtown and showcase the changes to an area.

Literature Review

City officials, policymakers, small business owners, company executives, and supporting nonprofits or advocacy groups all have concerns about how their city or region is portrayed in the media and how it is viewed by the public (Avraham, 1993; Harris 1976). Much has been written about media coverage and city governments, but there is not a significant amount of research on the benefits of a partnership between local municipalities and the news media. As well as, the impact that local news coverage can have when covering the revitalization and infrastructure changes happening in a city.

As shown in the 2019 study, "The State of Public Trust in Local News," published by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Gallup, Inc., local news media is considered by the public as a foundation of democracy by keeping people informed, holding leaders accountable, and celebrating community successes (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2009). Knowing that in the public opinion relies on both media and conversation, in the public sphere, we can acknowledge that a mutually beneficial relationship is crucial among city leaders, news entities and the

communities in which they serve (Shriky 2011). How a city is portrayed affects their residents, the general public, policymakers and future investors (Avraham, 2000, p. 363).

One thing that can help shape this relationship is an internal public relations staff member or communications person. This role is important for cities and their community partners or supporting organizations and is helpful for a myriad of reasons. In addition to fostering a good working relationship, it provides a point-of-contact for local news reporters. It can be used to leverage change internally, to help craft messages and shape public image (Hurst & Provis, 1996). As seen in previous research, there is a need for a mutual partnership that is supported by transparency, open communication and access between local news outlets and cities and/or counties. According to Hurst and Porvis (1996),

"Local governments and the news media need to know more about each other because of the assistance they can render each other" (109).

However, journalists shouldn't take the word of an internal public relations staff member at face-value. Journalists must always keep their code of ethics at the forefront of their reporting. According to The Society of Professional Journalists the Code of Ethics states:

"Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists believe they have a role in promoting local democracy." (SPJ Code of Ethics).

Their beliefs fall in line with long standing norms of journalism as a watchdog role, promoting neutrality, and objectivity (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014, p. 599). City leaders should understand that these values underscore every journalist's reporting. While there is a need to foster a good relationship with internal communications staff members and/or the spokesperson

for the city, that alone will not dictate how a story is reported on television or online.

Local News Consumption - Television and Digital

According to the results from a Pew research study, there has been a shift to people consuming news online. However, when it comes to news, people are still inclined to turn on the television. Nearly all adults get some news on a digital platform, but people who watch their news still prefer television - albeit just slightly (Geiger 2019; Mitchell 2018).

Research shows that Americans still find value in turning on their local TV stations for the latest news coverage. Even with some declines in viewership - as people are also consuming news online - local television still has a wider reach overall for news when compared to network and cable (Matsa 2018).

In a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, television and the Internet were "almost equally preferred as pathways to local news" (Geiger 2019). The survey shows that 37% of U.S. adults say they prefer to get their *local* news online and 41% prefer watching *local* news on television (Geiger 2019). While there have been shifts in news consumption, these results show that people still value local news coverage and are inclined to turn to their local stations - broadcast or online - for information pertaining to their communities.

The expansion of the Internet, the explosion of mobile applications and the surge in smartphone usage have led to changes in media consumption – a shift towards Internet-based communities like social media, wikis and blogs (Kerrigan & Graham, 2010). However, it's important to note how people *process* the news that they get from social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. Americans are still skeptical of the content they consume on social

media (Geiger 2019; Matsa 2018; Mitchell 2018). Because of this, people are looking for a reliable source and continue to put their trust in local news, whether on-air or online.

History of Rogers, Arkansas & Vision 2030

For this research, it is important to understand the history of Rogers and the timeline of its recent infrastructure and economic resurgence. The focus of this study is to examine local news outlets and their unique partnership with city administrators and supporting organizations, and how this partnership can impact revitalization efforts across the city or within a specific region, such as downtown Rogers.

The city of Rogers is located in Northwest Arkansas. Today, the city boasts numerous landmarks included on the National Register of Historic Places, a historical museum, shopping malls, parks, two lakes (i.e., Lake Atalanta and Beaver Lake) and growing residential and commercial developments (RogersAR.gov). Rogers has an estimated population of 68,669, according to the 2019 census from the U.S. Census Bureau (Census.gov).

The city was founded in 1881 when the St. Louis - San Francisco Railway, deemed the Frisco Railway, was built. The town is named after Captain Charles Rogers, the vice-president and general manager of the "Frisco Railway" (Collins & The Rogers Historical Museum, 2006). In 1884, the Stroud family purchased Stroud's Mercantile, a dry goods store at First Street and West Walnut Street, in what is now known as downtown Rogers. The Stroud family made significant investments that contributed to the early growth of Rogers, expanding their retail business and constructing another brick building and storefront on West Walnut Street (Collins & The Rogers Historical Museum, 2006).

A unique landmark in the city is the paved brick streets. The downtown area of Rogers was paved with concrete and overlaid with bricks in rows. The work was completed in December 1924, and the brick pavement remains today. Renovations were made to the streets in 2010 (Hales, January 2011).

In 1962, Sam Walton opened the first Walmart store in Rogers, Arkansas. According to “Our History” on the corporation’s website, Walton’s vision led Walmart to become the largest retailer in the world (Our History-Walmart Corporate). Furthermore, its continued success has greatly contributed to the development of Rogers, Arkansas and nearby cities in Northwest Arkansas. In 2014, the Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce published “Vision 2030.” This comprehensive plan:

"provided a 15-year roadmap to deal with everything from population growth, infrastructure improvements, economic development, and education" (Market Street Services & Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

This research included an entire section dedicated to downtown Rogers. According to the document *Community Assessment* portion, residents were very anxious to see changes in downtown Rogers and to see the area becoming a more vibrant component of the city. A few topics that arose in focus groups included entertainment, housing, new businesses and retail stores, and aesthetics. Additionally, some of the challenges identified included traffic, transportation and infrastructure. One of the themes that was continually repeated by "Vision 2030" survey respondents is that they would like to see changes in downtown Rogers. The final report from Market Street Services & Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce summed up the survey results concerning the future of downtown Rogers:

The City of Rogers has very clearly heard this desire from residents already. The development of a new Downtown Master Plan is occurring alongside this broader process

to develop a holistic Community Action Plan. The future of downtown Rogers is central to residents' vision of the future for the entire community. Quite simply, community vision and downtown improvement cannot be decoupled. (2014, p. 7).

Discussion

Results from a 2019 Knight-Gallup study show "Americans still believe local news outlets are doing many things right" (p. 13). According to that same study, local journalists are seen as more "caring, trustworthy and neutral or unbiased"(Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2019). People respond to local news reporters and/or anchors because they feel like they know them personally. This is helpful for smaller city governments like Rogers, Arkansas, as they are preparing for big changes that affect their residents. They can turn to the local news outlets to help shape their image. The media image of a city can make a difference in how the people who live there feel about their city and how they relate to nearby cities (Avaraham, 2000, p. 364).

Utilizing traditional news organizations, combined with their reach on social media and television, gives cities and their supporting organizations the opportunity to showcase the changes happening in their city and to connect with viewers on a deeper level. While there are advantages to having a communications professional or an internal public relations staff member, it is important to foster a mutual relationship with news reporters and/or traditional outlets. One of the benefits in having an internal communications or public relations staff member is the ability to have someone navigate the local news landscape, assist with transparency, field requests from news reporters and hopefully in turn provide an improvement in media coverage and a better public understanding of their activities (Hurst and Provis, 1996).

As shown in several Pew research studies, there is still skepticism from people when they

get their “news” from social media platforms. Many see their local news outlets – television, digital and print – as their primary, most trustworthy source for *local* news. There has also been an increase in people who rely on digital platforms belonging to local news outlets for their news. During my interviews with the city of Rogers, the mayor, representatives with Chamber of Commerce, Go Downtown Rogers, and former journalists, they all spoke of the importance of having a supportive relationship with local news reporters and members of the news media. In terms of “getting the word out” about events and public announcements, the news media can act as a “megaphone” in dispelling information. For stories that arise on a deeper level of newsworthiness, in my one-on-one interviews with them, city leaders say it is important to be transparent with the media and the public. They understand the push and pull of this relationship. News stories about downtown Rogers and the surrounding area have not always been positive. However, working with each other in a supportive, open way on the challenging stories can help when news reporters or outlets are working to pursue a good, positive angle that promotes the city. As a former public servant, the mayor of Rogers, along with his former public relations Staff member, reiterate the importance of having this balance with their local reporters. According to a study from The Brookings Institution, it is also important to keep both the opinion-makers and the media informed about the revitalization process (Leinberger, 2005).

In these conversations I discovered that there is a reliance on social media platforms. Many of the city leaders and advocates interviewed for this research said that having a dedicated Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account is necessary when it involves promoting community events that can be shared across the region of Northwest Arkansas. It also provides them with a tool and a platform to answer their residents and/or the people and businesses they serve directly. In a way that news outlets are not able to– due to lack of information, resources or time .

constraints. The share of Americans who prefer to get their news online is growing. In 2018, 34% of U.S. adults said they preferred to get news online, whether through websites, apps or social media. That is compared with 28% in 2016, (Mitchell, 2018). With these discussions, I believe that in addition to a supportive, public/private partnership with the news media, cities must also include social media as part of their strategy. This is especially true in helping to share updates and promote events. This is due to the nature of social media, these posts, photos, graphics, and event pages can be shared many times over which helps their reach. Ultimately, the strategy must be twofold.

This project was brought about due to my ten year experience working as a local news reporter and anchor. Additionally, I have lived in downtown Rogers for nearly six years and have witnessed the revitalization first-hand. Directly, I have worked with many of the city officials and leaders who I interviewed for this project, I have worked with throughout my career as a news reporter when reporting on stories that pertain to downtown Rogers. I have seen directly the benefits of creating a supportive partnership that can be mutually beneficial. I have heard from viewers, who are my own neighbors, who learned about an event, a story or news report because they saw it on a local media outlet. I see that people turn to their local news media because it's people who they trust. It is a vessel where they now get information. I also realize the reach of social media and the unique way that cities can use their Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts to reach a broader audience. This is necessary when you want to bring people from outside the downtown Rogers to the area.

Synthesis of Interviews

Over nearly two months, I conducted various on-camera interviews with people who had a connection to downtown Rogers or were in some kind of leadership capacity for the area. I interviewed Rogers Mayor Greg Hines, Karen Wagaman, the Vice President of Downtown Development with the Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, J.R. Shaw, the Executive Director for Visit Rogers, Rick Mcleod, a spokesperson for Go Downtown Rogers, a non-profit, grassroots organization that supports downtown businesses, and James Foreman, a small business owner in downtown with The Art Collective Gallery. I also interviewed Ben Cline a former news reporter for KNWA/KFTA, an NBC and FOX local affiliate who left television news to become the first Public Relations Manager for the city of Rogers. Cline now works in Little Rock with the Arkansas Municipal League. Lastly, I interviewed Channing Barker, the Communications Director for Benton County. Barker was also a Reporter/Anchor for KNWA/KFTA in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Every person interviewed had a similar attitude and overall media strategy for their respective organization and/or business. Their current strategy was two-fold. It included both reaching out to local news outlets for story and event coverage and sharing posts on their respective social media accounts. They also used their social media platforms to promote events, celebrate positive news, answer questions from their followers and engage with the community. There were differences, however, in the ways these stakeholders viewed their relationship with the local news media and how they believed that local news coverage for downtown benefitted them.

Ben Cline said that when he made the transition from working in local news to working

in city government, he still applied the knowledge and skill sets that he cultivated as a reporter because he understood both sides. Both he and Channing Barker were in unique positions because they were the first people to step into their respective roles. Due to the growing population and economic development in the area, both the city of Rogers and administrators with Benton County understood the growing need to have an in-house public relations role. As pointed out in previous research, this is an important role when navigating media.

“I knew how stories were gathered, how they were pitched, how the deadlines worked for reporters; and, it was a good perspective to have with me. It helped us shape our policy, or how we kind of handle ourselves around the media. We decided that we wouldn’t hide or treat them as an adversary. We knew that – in the end – they were there to help us get the message out,” Cline said. For both Cline and Barker, their previous experience helped them form a supportive strategy with local news media. They understand that there was a purpose in alerting the news to public events or pitching unique story ideas to highlight the downtown region or its residents. Moreover, when there were tougher, more controversial stories to cover, they approached their local news outlets and/or reporters with transparency and openness.

Mayor Greg Hines said that his previous work as a public servant and as a former criminal investigator helped him to appreciate a mutual relationship with local news reporters:

“I value the relationship that we’ve had with all forms of media. But all that I ask is to give me a fair shot,” Hines said.

And when it comes to being an outlet for promoting new events in downtown Rogers, Hines said that people still turn to the local news media to keep them “in the know.” In the interview, Hines said:

“I think the press has a great deal of responsibility and success and trust in the community for the... ‘Hey what’s happening that’s fun? What’s happening on the weekend?’”

He also mentioned that the city’s social media pages were available as a resource where people could learn more information about something that “they saw on the news.”

However, for a small business owner like James Forman, working as both the owner and promoter of his art gallery in downtown Rogers, he didn’t see much benefit from having a relationship with local news media. In my interview with him, Forman said that while he appreciated the local news reporters who came to cover an event or new exhibit at his gallery, the coverage from the local news outlets didn’t bring people indoors. Additionally, much of that coverage came “after the fact.” For his purposes, utilizing his social media platforms to post photos and events of his gallery are much more beneficial long-term in driving business and foot traffic.

J.R. Shaw, Karan Wagaman and Rick Mcleod, are all three in leadership positions whose mission is to bring people to downtown Rogers, to plan, promote and execute events, and to share story ideas that promote local business and people in the downtown area. All three individuals work to cultivate inclusive relationships with the local news media:

“There are many people who have lived here forever who never come downtown. There are people all throughout the region that say, ‘I never knew you were building a park downtown!’ Even though we’ve been shouting it from the rooftops for years. So, it’s important for us to utilize the news station platforms,” Shaw said.

Shaw and Wagaman both pointed out the partnerships that their organizations maintain with local news stations for sponsorship opportunities; as well as pairing up for events like a family 5K race, a festival, gala, parade, or free local entertainment series.

“From a sponsorship standpoint it’s critical for us to work with local media. For instance, with the Rogers Cycling Festival, several of our stations are media partners, and they will give us mentions on the air. They are hitting it before weather or before a news break. That’s a big deal. We are hitting folks where they watch and it has authority behind it,” Shaw said.

Shaw also said that the relationship between Visit Rogers and the Rogers Chamber of Commerce with local news outlets goes beyond promoting events or providing “shout-outs” on the air. “There is a sense of civic pride that is built when there is engagement from local media. It’s extremely important. It fosters engagement with stakeholders, investors and others who want to partner. People who want to be a part of these events and developments. It helps us for the future for developments,” Shaw said.

While there can be nuances to the relationships between municipalities and the local news media, all interviewees agreed that cities must develop strong, supportive relationships with reporters and their employers - print, digital, broadcast. Furthermore, city leaders and stakeholders must utilize their own digital and social media platforms to fill in the gaps where media resources simply cannot fully reach their respective audience and community.

Conclusion

How local news directly contributes to city growth is difficult to measure. However, we can see the significant impact that media can have in covering stories or events to disseminate information, helps people understand the changes happening, and call to action to bring people or businesses to an area.

By reviewing past literature and studies related to journalism, we see the significant

importance of local news media as a trusted source and a place where people go for hyperlocal coverage of their communities. In the interviews with the mayor of Rogers and leaders within Go Downtown Rogers and the Chamber of Commerce, they discussed the need to utilize local news media (i.e., print, digital and television) to give accurate and reliable community updates and event coverage. We also learned that, at times, the coverage is not as “rosy” or as “optimistic” as city officials may hope for; moreover, there have been times when city leaders view the outcome of a news story gives people a negative view of the changes happening in and around downtown Rogers.

From the interviews performed for this study, we also see the need for cities, community partners, nonprofits and businesses to have their own social media platforms to share their messages, post about events and engage with people. Local news outlets, due to an inherent strain on time and resources, simply can't report on *everything* that's happening in and around downtown Rogers. For a comprehensive media strategy, an in-house social media strategy must be included using digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Through the in-person conversations coupled with my own experience in the field, I delve deeper by looking through the lens of downtown Rogers and witnessing the revitalization directly.

Objectives and Goals

I have worked as a local news reporter and anchor for ten years. After completing my coursework at the University of Arkansas for my Master of Arts Degree in Journalism, I accepted a position as a digital editor with 40/29 News. Since that time, I have worked behind-the-scenes, in the field, and on the anchor desk as a journalist in Northwest Arkansas. When I speak to people about this region where I live, I often say, “ It’s a unique experience to watch a place become something else.” It is not often that we have the opportunity to see a city – or an entire region – transform. In more than a decade, I have personally witnessed these changes. The best part is that I have witnessed this as a journalist.

I watched the transformation of Northwest Arkansas while covering the local news: stories that matter to the people who are building a life and a community here. From city council meetings, crime investigations, car crashes, infrastructure changes, building a world-renowned museum, a surge in residential and commercial development, protests on social justice, controversial state laws and a worldwide pandemic: I have covered it all as a local news reporter. I have spent ten years covering local news in a place that has become my home.

For me, the purpose of this research was twofold. After accepting a job with 40/29 News, as most journalists can attest, my work schedule was unpredictable. I worked various shifts including nights, weekends, overnights, early mornings and the daylight hours in between. I moved to Rogers to have a shorter drive to work. Eventually, I found a home in the downtown area. I covered many stories over the years about the expansion plan for the downtown area. I saw the new plans for Railyard Park, I watched construction crews repair brick streets and how developers tried to restore old buildings. I saw new businesses open, with some eventually

closing. As a journalist – a local news reporter – I interviewed the mayor, city council members, the chamber of commerce, business leaders and nonprofit organizations who were all trying to “make this place something else.” They were all hoping to contribute to a “new and improved” downtown Rogers. Living in downtown Rogers since 2015, I also witnessed the changes as a resident. As an active community member, I dined, shopped, walked the trails, enjoyed the green spaces near Lake Atalanta, and attended the many public events that were held. Through all of those lenses – a resident, a community member and a journalist – I was a part of the revitalization of downtown Rogers.

As part of my multimedia thesis project, I wanted to explore this unique partnership that cities can have with their local news outlets. In a place experiencing significant change such as Northwest Arkansas, the community is looking to their local news media as a trustworthy, dependable resource for information. Along with their community partners and stakeholders, cities need a way to amplify their message while maintaining transparency. While many of these entities have their own social media or digital platforms, they still find value sharing information through local news. Viewers, the audience members, find value in seeing coverage of their towns – their communities. With a laptop, camera, tripod and microphone, I approached this research from dual perspective – as a journalist and as a neighbor.

By documenting the ideas, strategies and goals from those who have played a key role contributing to the changes in downtown Rogers, my hope is that their challenges and successes can be applied in other municipalities looking to create their own dual media strategy and unique public/private partnership as a way to tell the story of their city.

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