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Creating a Conversation that Everyone is a Part Of: Community Newspapers and the Isolation of
Minorities and Disadvantaged Populations

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Introduction and Thesis:

Community newspapers provide current events and news in a quick, accessible fashion for the communities in which they reside. As community newspapers focus on small areas rather than national or international news, they can give thorough coverage of all news in a local area that residents should be informed of. Community newspapers allow a public discussion of local happenings that invite readers to participate by writing letters to the editor and allow easily accessed education for members of the community to discuss privately or act on.

During my time at *The Coastal Observer*, I have become increasingly aware of the participatory nature of community newspapers as readers write to the editor in response to local news. In addition, the opinion column often expresses multiple viewpoints of readers on various issues described in past papers. By allowing local community members updates on development, zoning, education, poverty, and more, community newspapers are an essential tool in helping create sustainable communities by creating conversations about sustainability. Community newspapers allow an understanding of how every sustainable development goal is or is not represented in local communities and therefore help their community progress. It is only by creating several sustainable communities that we can create a sustainable world.

However, for sustainable development to succeed, it is important to ensure that all people receive equitable attention for progress to be non-discriminatory. Community newspapers serve as a key tool to develop and understand equity as a source of information and participation within a local area. From analyzing the opinion articles submitted to *The Coastal Observer* over a six-month period, a conclusion can be formed about the focus of the local community on issues throughout the six months. Through my research, I will be discussing the focus of opinion articles within *The Coastal Observer* to determine how often community members are focusing

on how issues are diversely impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations. This analysis will help develop an understanding of equity on the Waccamaw Neck by recognizing the focus on equity that community members have and are sharing with one another for further thought through the medium of the local newspaper.

Literature Review:

Community newspapers are a vital source for small communities to create and maintain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and discuss issues important for the entire community to reflect on and solve. As a source of information, citizen journalism, and community advocacy, community newspapers bring together individuals, businesses and organizations for the collective good. As stated in “Advocacy and Infrastructure: Community Newspapers, Ethics, and Information Needs” by Kathleen Bartzen Culver, “All journalism seeks to provide information to citizens and act as a check on government and other institutions as a watchdog. But as a special brand of journalism, community journalism privileges citizens in their connection to each other and their town.”¹ Promoting social cohesion, “community newspapers contribute to building cohesive geographic communities by integrating local residents into common values and interests in pursuit of community social goals” according to Masahiro Yamamoto in “Community Newspaper Use Promotes Social Cohesion.”²

As stated in “The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development: Defining Urban Social Sustainability” by Dempsey, Nicola, Glen Bramley, Sinéad Power, and Caroline Brown, urban social sustainability is “a wide-ranging multi-dimensional concept, with the underlying question

1. Kathleen Culver, “Advocacy and Infrastructure,” 138.

2. Masahiro Yamamoto, “Community Newspaper Use Promotes Social Cohesion,” 20.

‘what are the social goals of sustainable development?’”³ With “media as mediators, as bringing sides together, rather than standing aside or seeking an elusive objectivity,”⁴ community newspapers bridge together multiple perspectives to answer questions about what sustainable development means to multiple stakeholders. In fact, according to Nolukhanyo T Metula and Oluyinka O Osunkunle in “Community Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development,” “in order for community participation in development processes to occur and come up with good results, there is a need to shift from big to small participatory community media such as community radio or community newspapers.”⁵

As a part of bringing together multiple stakeholders, community newspapers often allow participation from their audience through letters to the editor and guest columns written by ‘citizen journalists,’ as defined by Beth H. Garfrerick in “The Community Weekly Newspaper: Telling America’s Stories.”⁶ Community papers are described by Garfrerick as providing “a wealth of first-hand accounts of our nation’s history because they [contain] the personal correspondence, journal entries, and political thought.”⁷ By bringing together a culmination of entire community populations, weekly papers allow content provided both for and by the people that result in a well-informed audience; one that is then able to make more sustainable decisions and provide feedback on issues that impact the location.

³ Nicola Dempsey, Glen Bramley, Sinéad Power, and Caroline Brown, “The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development,” 290.

4. Kathleen Culver, “Advocacy and Infrastructure,” 139.

5. Nolukhanyo T Metula and Oluyinka O Osunkunle, “Community Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development,” 933.

6. Beth H. Garfrerick, “The Community Weekly Newspaper,” 168.

7. Beth H. Garfrerick, “The Community Weekly Newspaper,” 152.

The connections provided by community newspapers are a necessity for successful development according to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 17, which focuses on partnerships "at the global, regional, national and local levels — built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the center."⁸Culver reiterates this point, stating "Citizens should have agency to monitor and influence processes and institutions in the public and private sectors. They should have sufficient knowledge and understanding of collective issues."⁹ Community newspapers are the source of knowledge and understanding provided to many areas that help citizens contribute to and gain a better place to live.

As explained in "Thinking About Citizen Journalism: The Philosophical and Practical Challenges of User-Generated Content for Community Newspapers," by Seth Lewis, Kelly Kaufhold and Dominic Lasorsa, "in America's rural communities, the local newspaper is often the best and sometimes the only source for local news."¹⁰ By being an important and sometimes only source for community members to understand and collaborate on issues in their area of residence, the effectiveness of community newspapers is rendered of even higher importance. Although some editors "reject the notion of citizen journalism mainly as a matter of Principle" and others "because they regard it as primarily unworkable,"¹¹ it is also true that some editors "regard citizen journalism as a distinct advancement over the way journalism has been practiced

8. United Nations, "Global Partnerships."

9. Kathleen Culver, "Advocacy and Infrastructure," 139.

10. Seth C Lewis, Kelly Kaufhold, and Dominic L Lasorsa, "Thinking About Citizen Journalism," 167.

11. Seth C Lewis, Kelly Kaufhold, and Dominic L Lasorsa, "Thinking About Citizen Journalism," 169-170.

in the past” and others view it as something that “might influence community engagement in local affairs” rather than in light of the news production process.¹² The editors who believe that citizen journalism is an advancement likely prescribe to the idea stated by the United Nations in Sustainable Development Goal 17—partnerships matter for creating a world that can continue to thrive.¹³

Community newspapers bring together multiple perspectives and issues along with citizen journalism to “foster local collective unity by disseminating a coherent and recurrent system of symbols that promote community images, traditions and interests.”¹⁴ Granting social cohesion to communities not only helps create a symbol of community but since “social cohesion is an important antecedent to positive social and health outcomes; the modern role of community newspapers lies in the realization of community well-being.”¹⁵ In addition to these benefits and ways of promoting a more sustainable community, “the mobilizing and substantive political information provided by mass media are necessary components of healthy community democracies” as stated in “Community Newspapers Play Significant Role in Election” by Lee Shaker.¹⁶ By helping promote democracy, sustainability is improved more with Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions—United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16.¹⁷

12. Seth C Lewis, Kelly Kaufhold, and Dominic L Lasorsa, “Thinking About Citizen Journalism,” 171-172.

13. United Nations, “Global Partnerships.”

14. Masahiro Yamamoto, “Community Newspaper Use Promotes Social Cohesion,” 19.

15. Masahiro Yamamoto, “Community Newspaper Use Promotes Social Cohesion,” 20.

16. Lee Shaker, “Community Newspapers Play Significant Role in Election,” 8.

17. United Nations, “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.”

However, all the benefits of community newspapers are discounted if the newspapers do not offer equitable representation of the various groups within the community which they serve. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities must be inclusive as well as safe, resilient and sustainable.¹⁸ In order to be inclusive, the conversations being held within the community newspaper must be centered around all groups in the community.

As sustainable development requires the success of seventeen different goals, each goal impacts different groups within the community in different ways. In order to achieve each goal, the community must be looked at holistically. One promise of community newspapers is to promote social cohesion and develop communal ideals and unity, however, this cannot be achieved if certain groups are removed from the discourse.

Although groups within each community “conduct identity projects to define themselves,” as stated by Karen Faster in “Newspaper coverage and cultural representations of racial and ethnic groups in Minneapolis, 1941–1971,” “by reporting on identity formation projects, newspapers and newsletters disseminate images of the group to others in the cohort and to people outside its bounds.”¹⁹ Therefore, topics reported within a community newspaper, whether by reporters or community journalists in the opinion column, create a dialogue about individual groups in the community. In order to make a dialogue that is impactful, it is important that conversations about each group are equitable and to ensure that no group is excluded from topics of importance.

18. United Nations, “Sustainable Cities and Communities.”

19. Karen Elizabeth Faster. “Newspaper Coverage and Cultural Representations of Racial and Ethnic Groups in Minneapolis.”

Empirical Data and Observation:

The Coastal Observer is a newspaper in Pawleys Island, South Carolina that allows its readers to contribute to the weekly paper by writing in letters for the opinion column. This is a common feature of local newspapers and is a way to allow more community engagement and participatory journalism. By analyzing the opinion column of *The Coastal Observer*, the focus of participatory journalism within the community will reflect what issues and discussions local members of the community not only care about, but also what they feel the need to participate in and call on others to consider. An analysis of the letters submitted to *The Coastal Observer*'s opinion column over a six-month period will allow a small sample size that reflects on the focus of community members during the time period and whether participatory journalists discussed issues through a lens of equity. As community newspapers allow a forum for participatory journalism, looking at the opinion column allows a mirror of the community itself and a scope of what issues community members find important and necessary to discuss and work on together.

In order to analyze whether topics impacting minorities and diverse populations were discussed within letters to the editor, I read the opinion articles in each issue of the newspaper from the beginning of October to the end of March.²⁰ While reading each article, I determined whether it related to a topic that I selected by evaluating the language used. The topics I included in my search were: diversity/inclusion/equity, poverty/affordability, racism, sexism/women's issues, immigration and LGBTQ+ Issues. Analyzing each topic, I also searched for related terms such as Black Lives Matter to tally under the topic of racism, dreamers to tally under the topic of

20. The Coastal Observer, Opinion.

immigration, homophobia to tally under LGBTQ+ issues, etc. Using this approach provided a broader scope of understanding in order to display a more accurate summary of what topics were discussed and which were not. Even if they were not discussed, you can find them using the narrowed key terms. These terms were chosen as they are the most popular key words discussed in gender and diversity studies as well as popular ‘buzz words’ in national news and current events from the six-month period being analyzed. The chart below details how many times each topic yielded results within the six-month period:

Key Word	Total Mentions
Diversity / Inclusion / Equity	2
Poverty / Affordability	6
Racism	4
Sexism / Women’s Issues	3
Immigration	2
LGBTQ+ Issues	2
Total Mentions:	19

Within a sampling of twenty-six issues of *The Coastal Observer*, discussions of challenges impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations were only mentioned nineteen times—less than once per week. In this time period, 130 opinion articles were written, making the 19 articles discussing issues faced by minorities and disadvantaged populations representative of 14.6% of the total opinion articles. Despite the sampling showing less than one mention per week, the issues mentioned were wide ranging and discussed a variety of topics. However, merely discussing issues impacting racial minorities, immigrants, or the LGBTQ+ community did not equate to fair representation or an equitable result. Rather, the two mentions in the LGBTQ+ issues category were both against promoting equity for the LGBTQ+

community. Similarly, one of the two mentions of immigration was negative, and two mentions of racial issues were negative. One mention of sexism/women's issues was also negative.²¹

Considering the six negative reactions to minority issues, within six months, out of the nineteen mentions of minority issues, only thirteen were submitted with the intention of developing a more equitable community. This altered number shows only thirteen submissions in twenty-six weeks were submitted and published in *The Coastal Observer* with the hopes of developing a more equitable community that fairly represents minorities and disadvantaged populations. Out of the 130 submissions, this represents ten percent of all opinion articles. Simultaneously, the thirteen mentions of issues impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations often did not discuss more than one minority or disadvantaged population at a time. Therefore, when evaluating the focus on one topic at a time, the lack of coverage becomes more urgent. For example, despite a Pew Research Center study conducted from August 31, 2020, to September 7, 2020, where 78% of U.S. adults discussed hearing 'a lot' about "ongoing confrontations between law enforcement and protesters in cities around the country,"²² due to protests for the Black Lives Matter movement, only four mentions were made of racial equality in the opinion columns of *The Coastal Observer* from October 2020 to March 2021. Even within the four mentions of racial equality, only two were written with the intent of promoting equality.²³

The lack of discussion about issues of equity by readers of *The Coastal Observer* contrasts South African newspapers analyzed by Metula and Osunkunle in "Community

21. The Coastal Observer, "Opinion."

22. John Gramlich, "Americans Have Heard More about Clashes."

23. The Coastal Observer, "Opinion."

Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development.” Newspapers identified as successful in promoting sustainable community development in this case study were described by Metula and Osunkunle as “useful to counter state propaganda, inform, mobilize and educate the masses about their rights and also facilitate the building of strong community organizations”²⁴ and states that in order to make media content relevant, “community newspapers encourage diversity... engaging civil society and identifying ingredients for sustainable development.”²⁵ In the South African newspapers observed by Metula and Osunkunle, diverse input for the community newspaper is a key aspect to help develop a sustainable community and obtained consistently. However, in *The Coastal Observer*, community contributors only consider a perspective rooted in diversity on average once every two weeks.

Analysis:

The Coastal Observer's opinion columns from October 2020 to March 2021, do not draw in a large amount of interest on how issues in the community are impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations. Due to this issue, the goals of sustainable development will not reach their full potential without an increased focus on developing a narrative that centers all people within the population. As the United Nations describes, one way to help create effective partnerships for the sustainable development goals is to join or create “a group in your local community that seeks to mobilize action on the implementation of the SDGS.”²⁶ One way to

24. Nolutkanyo T Metula and Oluyinka O Osunkunle, “Community Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development,” 935.

25. Nolutkanyo T Metula and Oluyinka O Osunkunle, “Community Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development,” 936.

26. United Nations, “Partnerships.”

develop such a community is to build it within the space of community journalism through *The Coastal Observer*.

As a community newspaper, “*The Coastal Observer* has the ability to act as a check on government and other institutions as a watchdog... privileg(ing) citizens in their connection to each other and their town.”²⁷ In this way, *The Coastal Observer* may show how a community newspaper can “have a significant role in the dissemination of news, promoting communal participation and development, community integration and inclusion.”²⁸ This integration and inclusion may only be fully recognized once all people within the community are also fully recognized within the newspaper’s opinion column.

However, an evaluation of a six-month time period, from the beginning of October to the end of March’s newspapers, shows that *The Coastal Observer* does not have a readership that often reflects on issues of equity within the opinion column of the newspaper.²⁹ The weekly community newspaper has the potential to grow into a more effective tool in achieving sustainable development goals if community members alter their public conversations about various issues by considering how they impact a larger range of groups of people.

As each community newspaper provides a forum for debate, it acts as a channel between citizens and institutions, and offers commentary to stimulate effective governance, citizen participation, and vibrant communities.³⁰ If the forum does not consider the issues impacting a

27. Kathleen Culver, “Advocacy and Infrastructure,” 138.

28. Nolutkhanyo T Metula and Oluyinka O Osunkunle, “Community Newspaper as a Tool for Community Development,” 930.

29. The Coastal Observer, “Opinion.”

30. Kathleen Culver, “Advocacy and Infrastructure,” 138.

segment of the community, it is apparent that these goals are not being effectively achieved with everyone's involvement. As all issues impact groups within a community differently, without community members considering all community issues to ensure equity, disparities between populations more easily thrive.

Conclusion:

Based on an evaluation of opinion pieces in *The Coastal Observer*, the newspaper is not receiving a large response from community members working together to solve issues impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations. The zip code 29585 representing Pawleys Island, is the primary target audience of *The Coastal Observer*. From this area only 16% of the community is made up of racial minorities and 10.2% of community members live below the poverty line. The community also includes a 6.1% foreign-born population and is 50% female.³¹ However, with the combination of these intersecting identities, only half of the issues of *The Coastal Observer* discussed issues of the community in a way that considered the equity amongst minorities and disadvantaged populations in the area.³²

In weekly editions of *The Coastal Observer*, minority and disadvantaged populations are not often found writing opinion articles about the impact of specific issues on their experience in the area. Similarly, others are not writing in regularly to promote equity, either. In order to develop a world where these issues are centered and worked towards, cities and communities must make strides to promote equity, fairness, and justice in their own communities. Weekly community newspapers such as *The Coastal Observer* are spaces that offer a chance for readers

31. U.S. Census Bureau, "Census Profile: 29585."

32. The Coastal Observer, "Opinion."

to participate in the conversation and form partnerships across the community to develop an equitable place for everyone to live. When community members are not developing conversations around equity within this space, there is a missed opportunity to utilize this forum for partnerships that are justice-seeking.

Future Research and Recommendations:

After recognizing the lack of opinion articles that discuss problems impacting minorities and disadvantaged populations disproportionately, future research could analyze what groups of people regularly are writing into *The Coastal Observer* and whether minorities are regularly participating in the conversation. Additionally, future research may consider why *The Coastal Observer* is not receiving a high volume of opinion articles that consider the impact of issues on minorities and disadvantaged populations, even during a time of social unrest. Future research may also consider if conversations about equity and justice are happening through different means within the community—in spaces like social media forums, churches, or other. Due to a variety of opportunities to hold public discussions in smaller circles, a community newspaper may not be the first tool utilized to discuss these issues. However, due to *The Coastal Observer* being a newspaper centered around and available to the entire community (though at a cost), using this means to discuss issues would allow a wider audience and a more holistic conversation.

In order to increase coverage on issues of equity at *The Coastal Observer*, the editor, Charles Swenson, discusses that a call for submissions on issues disproportionately impacting minorities would not be appropriate as it would "distort the mirror" of the community that the opinion column promises. However, the analysis derived from this study may prompt community organizations and individuals which have concern for issues impacting minority and

disadvantaged people to consider submitting pieces to the opinion column on these topics for other community members to read.³³

Through more active participation and intentional submissions, community members and organizations who center their focus on minority issues have an opportunity yet to be utilized to raise awareness of issues of importance within the opinion column of *The Coastal Observer*. By utilizing this opportunity, the opinion pages of *The Coastal Observer* can have a larger impact on the local community and help uplift everyone in it. With more of the community able to participate in community development and discussion, the implementation of all sustainable development goals will be possible, including those which do not impact people of a higher socioeconomic status.

³³ Charles Swenson, email message to the author, April 25, 2021.

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