

# Black and White and Still Read All Over

## An Examination of the State of College Newspapers in a Turbulent Time

Lisa Lyon Payne

*Virginia Wesleyan College*

### Abstract

*This paper provides an initial investigation of the current state of the college newspapers among liberal arts schools in the southeast. An online survey using both open and closed-ended questions examines variables such as method and frequency of publication, use of advertising and online presence. Only 37.5% of respondents reported having a journalism program at their institution, and those who contributed to the student newspaper came from majors ranging from biology to philosophy. While a full 100% of respondents reported having advertising in their college newspapers, about one-third of respondents reported they did not have an online edition of the paper. Most publications were fewer than 10 pages and did have a faculty adviser to the publication. Of the schools that participated, a majority said there is no class credit associated with their publications. Also of interest, just more than half of respondents stated staff writers receive some form of compensation for their contributions to the publication; where this compensation comes from varies.*

### Introduction

What do Twitter, the iPad and a campus newspaper have in common? Current literature suggests that all three are a preferred communication choice for many of today's college students (The Washington Times, March 8, 2012). Despite the slow and agonizing decline of traditional newspapers, research indicates that even in this modern, wireless world of communication, many college students gravitate toward the print version of their campus newspaper over an electronic version. Additionally, despite the woes of the traditional news daily, many student newspapers appear to be weathering the storm with fewer economic troubles (Keller 2008, Supiano 2012).

In addition to the documented decline of the traditional daily newspaper, enrollment in journalism programs has also suffered a decline. Percentages of students in journalism programs have dropped 6.6% since as recently as 2007 (Vlad, Becker, and Kazragis 2011, 300-301). This holds true despite an overall increase by 2% in all mass communication programs. Additionally, some scholars have suggested that daily print newspapers may cease to exist altogether within a decade (Zerba 2011, 597). While readership studies suggest that college students are averse to reading a daily print newspaper, their campus newspaper appears to be an exception. Some possible reasons for this phenomenon are the direct relevance of a college newspaper, the free price tag, and the notion that a college campus is one of the few remaining places with high pedestrian traffic and large amounts of leisure time (Jackson 2012).

If the newspaper industry and journalism in higher education are both experiencing turbulent times, but the college newspaper is "humming along," (Keller 2008) this presents a critical

need to examine the role of the college newspaper medium to better understand this interesting intersection of variables in a time of massive industry change.

This paper provides an initial investigation of the current state of the college newspaper among liberal arts schools in the Southeast. It specifically looks at variables like method and frequency of publication, use of advertising and online presence.

College newspapers and the Internet. There is no question that the Internet is dominating other older, less electronically-inclined media in many aspects. However, this trend is relatively recent for college newspapers. A little over one-third of college newspapers in the Editor and Publisher Yearbook did not even have a website in 2007 (Brockman, Bergland and Hon, 2011). Yet, an online presence is largely assumed for today's major college media. The Internet can be used via cell phone, computer or music player. It has taken portability to an entirely new level. In the digital age, the so-called "dreamer generation" has made it increasingly difficult for older media to keep up (Zerba 2011, 597). Althuas and Tewksbury (2000) suggest that the Internet has actually become an inextricable part of the fabric of the lives of college students and their means for accessing information. An examination of the role of student newspapers is of critical importance now because today's college students are the first true "Internet generation" (Diddi & Larosse 2006, 197).

The Internet is presently the dominant media and dominant source for news for many. It prescribes something few other media can offer, personalization. Internet news is constantly updated and just a click away, instant gratification to soothe the impatient, news-hungry soul. Though this may be true, few newspapers are published solely online. While a third of college newspapers exist only in print form, this means there's a remaining two thirds who've made the transition to the Internet, maintaining both a print and an online edition.

A recent study of student news websites in the Pacemaker's Winners Circle found that WordPress is the most common content management system, replacing College Publisher, which is no longer offered for free (Brockman, Bergland and Hon 2011). WordPress and College Publisher are content management Internet hosts for college newspapers. College Publisher provides web hosting in exchange for revenue generated from selling ad space on the websites. College Publisher's staff is available to newsrooms 24 hours a day to answer all web issues for less than web design-savvy college journalists (Truong 2010). Colleges are now offering courses in new media and online journalism separately from regular journalism courses. Program coordinators are re-evaluating the line between journalism and web development (Parry 2011). College Publisher can cost as much as \$2,000 a year (Parry 2011). Domain names and running a website can be pricey for those who choose to create and design their own pages, so many of them are taking full advantage of advertising revenue.

According to Nick Summers of Newsweek, "premier college dailies" are now indistinguishable from real, professional papers. Some college papers are as long as 26 pages with full-color spreads. Putting out huge editions gets easier when advertisers unreservedly lust after your readers. The college demographic is as sweet as it gets: by definition young and educated, they're savvy, brand-conscious and wield \$41 billion in discretionary spending power (Summers 2005).

College newspapers and advertising. Information on the how the downturn in advertising has affected college newspapers is not as grim as that for the newspaper industry on the whole. College newspapers enjoyed a 15% increase in advertising revenue in 2007, while print advertising revenue for commercial newspapers fell 9% (Keller 2008). This does not mean college newspapers are entirely unaffected, however. But the overall financial outlook for campus newspapers appears to be bucking the industry trend. Online advertising revenue is more difficult to grow, experts say, because the readership is more broad: alumni, parents, board

members. This readership is less interesting to the local businesses who buy the bulk of print advertisements (Supiano 2012). Some suggest that as the trend toward online newspapers continues, the college newspapers will not be immune to this threat and may begin to suffer from advertising revenue loss as well.

College newspapers and change. With many variables surrounding the college newspaper industry in a state of flux, new strategies are emerging to maintain fiscal solvency. Oklahoma State University's Daily O'Collegian newspaper has decided to take a different route for generating revenue. In January 2011, the campus paper began charging a \$10/year access fee for readers outside a 25-mile radius of the college campus. The O'Collegian has a print circulation of 10,000, with 25% of its readership being affected by the new fees. The campus paper expects to reach professors, alumni, parents, and future students, many of whom are outside the 25-mile radius and would be required to pay for readership (Parry 2011).

The University of Georgia's The Red & Black has recently reduced its print frequency from five days a week out of financial need (Morales 2012). And the University of Virginia's The Cavalier Daily has announced it will no longer publish in print on Fridays. Both publications have announced an increase in emphasis on online news (Supiano 2012).

## Need for study

As college budgets continue to tighten, college newspapers are increasingly seeking alternate ways to adjust to the needs of the climate (Matheny 2012). This unique intersection of industry variables creates a critical need to examine the current state of the college newspaper. Critics have lamented the dearth of scholarship addressing college newspapers (Brockman, Bergland and Hon 2011). This paper is an initial examination intended for descriptive purposes. It will provide a snapshot of the variables currently affecting college newspapers. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the sample is limited and the responses include both quantitative and qualitative data. It is intended as an initial examination of how colleges run and maintain their college newspapers. Are they online? Are they completely student-run? What news do the publications cover? Which majors are writing for the newspaper? The research objectives for this study are as follows:

1. To determine the method(s), frequency and length of publication.
2. To determine what role the paper plays and its significance to the campus community.
3. To determine whether the paper plays any role off campus in the surrounding community.
4. To identify the paper's content and the news it includes and excludes.
5. To identify the extent to which the newspapers include advertising
6. To examine the role and scope of an online presence of the newspaper

### Method

Sample: Because of the deliberate focus on premiere, liberal arts institutions in the southeast, Phi Beta Kappa's website, [www.pbk.org](http://www.pbk.org), was used to determine the sample for this study. From that point, the researchers visited each institution's website for the email of the editor-in-chief for each campus publication. There are 280 PBK chapters, which PBK divides into seven districts: New England, Middle Atlantic, East Central, North Central, South Atlantic, South Central and Western. This study surveyed only Phi Beta Kappa schools from the South Atlantic district.

This district is composed of 51 PBK schools. The survey was sent to 51 schools, and three of them were returned via failure to deliver notifications. Sixteen institutions responded, yielding a 33% response rate. This response rate may be attributed to the fact that the survey was sent

out late into the spring semester, while students are busy with exams and finishing various assignments.

### Questionnaire

The survey was sent out via email, Monday, May 2, 2011 to the editors-in-chief of Phi Beta Kappa institutions in the South Atlantic Region. The email included a brief explanation of the study and a link to the survey, formatted by and hosted at SurveyMonkey.com. A reminder email was sent out Wednesday, May 4, 2011. In the initial email, sample members were notified that the survey would only be available for completion through the night of Friday, May 6, 2011. The survey was closed at midnight.

The survey was available for completion for five days. In those five days, 16 responses were collected, equaling a third of those sampled. Those who responded became eligible to win a \$50 Visa gift card, to be mailed to the winner. The winner was randomly selected and notified Monday, May 9, 2011. SurveyMonkey.com was used for constructing, administering and collecting data for the questionnaire issued via email.

The questionnaire was composed of 25 questions in a variety of formats. Questions formats included multiple choice, short answer, semantic differential and Likert scale. The questions were assembled in three parts.

The first part was designed to gather demographic data on the institution being surveyed. Whether the school is public or private, campus population and the percentage of residential students were among the questions asked. Respondents were also asked to check which programs of study the school offers, including Journalism, English, Business, Creative Writing, Education, New Media and others.

The second part addressed the school's newspaper. This included questions about frequency of publication, length of the publication, presence of advertising, number of advertisements per issue, level of adviser involvement, extent of non-campus news coverage, whether students outside of journalism contribute to the paper, the sections included in the newspaper, whether newspaper staff is paid and presence of an online edition.

The final section specifically addressed online publications. Questions addressed how often the online content is updated, whether archived material was available online, who updates the online content and whether a web hosting site is used. Data were collected and processed initially by SurveyMonkey.com. and were further analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

### Results

*Campus Demographics.* Of the sixteen participants, 56.2% were members of public institutions. Campus populations were divided with 43.8% less than 2,500 students and 43.8% with student populations of 10,000 or more.

A second key demographic was the percentage of residents who presumably have easier, quicker access to campus publications in their print format versus commuters. Only 6.3% said their campus populations were 0- 20% residential, with 12.5% claiming 20-40% was residential; 31.3% claimed 40-60% was residential, 12.5% claimed 60-80% was residential and 37.5% claimed residents made up 80-100% of the student population.

The last question of this section asked participants about the academic programs offered at their institution. A list of programs was given, and respondents were asked to check all that were offered. It was made clear to participants that while some programs encompass others, (e.g. a communications department may include media studies and/or journalism), they were only to check those specifically offered at their college. This question examined how many

schools offer journalism and like fields as a background for questions later in the survey regarding newsroom makeup. It was found that only 37.5% of institutions surveyed offer a Journalism program. Other results include the following

- 68.8% offer Communications or Media Studies
- 50% of the institutions offer Public Relations
- 31.3% offer Professional Writing
- 18.8% offer New Media.

The most popular programs of study were English at 100%, Art at 93.8%, and Computer Science or Programming at 87.5%.

*Campus newspapers.* The second part of the questionnaire examined the institutions' publications. The first questions asked about the frequency of print publication. The responses were almost evenly divided, with 26.7% responding daily, 26.7% weekly and 26.7% bi-weekly. Only 13.2% responded yes to a monthly publication. An "other" category was given as an option, under which one participant responded stating their newspaper was published in print twice weekly and online daily.

Respondents were asked about the length of their publications; 53.8% responded their papers were fewer than 10 pages, and 33.3% said 10-15 pages, while 12% reported publications longer than 15 pages.

Respondents were asked about the frequency of advertisements in their print publications. One hundred percent of participants responded "yes" to using advertising. Additionally, participants were asked to estimate the number of ads per edition. Forty percent responded there were 5-10 ads in every print edition, while 33.3% claimed to have fewer than five. Only 13.3% claimed to have more than 20 ads per print edition.

The next section of this survey had several short answer questions. The first asked participants about faculty involvement: is there an adviser to their publication, and does that person have trained journalism experience? The majority (62.5%) of respondents said their student newspaper does have a faculty adviser. Of these responses, six said their advisers are trained in journalism, having worked for major papers. The remaining four responded that the advisor's role was limited or merely there for the business aspect. One participant said, "We are an independent company that does not employ university personnel. We have a faculty liaison adviser that attends business meetings, but has no editorial significance."

Respondents were asked an open-ended question to assess to what extent non-campus news was included in the school newspaper. The majority of publications only covered national news when it could be reported from an angle that applied to students. For example, one respondent said, "Non-campus news is only included if it can be localized." Another wrote, "Non-campus news is included if there's a campus response that deserves coverage, like fundraising for the Haiti earthquake." One respondent noted including a new Global section in the newspaper. They wrote, "It appears in every issue, and highlights Goucher's study abroad requirements as well as includes international news articles." One participant answered saying their publication was the only one in town, so their news extended beyond the campus and to local members of the community and would include anything that could affect the town. Another respondent said they are the paper of record for the county.

Question 10 was an open response question. It asked participants if many students from majors outside journalism participate in the student newspaper? If so, which majors contribute? Only one respondent said their staff was comprised only of journalism majors. In fact, five replied that their institution did not have a journalism major, so all of the contributors were non-journalism majors. Ten respondents indicated they draw from a broad range of student majors for their newspaper staff. Some of the specific majors listed were English, Philosophy,

Economics, Political Science, Biology, Computer Science, American Studies and International Affairs.

Participants were asked to select from a list all sections covered by their publication. Most common sections reported are news, arts and entertainment, opinions, sports, letters to the editor and features. Least common sections are business, off-campus news, national news and weather.

It was found that 81.25% of respondents' institutions do not offer a course coinciding with participation in the student paper. Furthermore, 50% of participants' institutions pay at least a portion of their news teams.

## Online Editions

The final section of the survey asked questions about online editions of the newspaper. Eleven of the 16 participants have online editions of their papers and were eligible to fill out this section of the questionnaire. Put another way, 31% of respondents did not have an online edition of their newspaper.

When asked how often newsrooms updated their online content, 45.5% said they updated it daily. The remaining 54.5% percent was split evenly between updating their content every few hours, weekly, and only as the print edition came out. Furthermore, 100% of participants reported that archives were available online.

Respondents were also asked who manages the online content. This was asked as an open-ended response, to which respondents gave a variety of answers. The most popular response was editors were responsible for updating content in coordination with an online editor. Other responses included a multimedia editor, a technology manager and the editor in chief.

When asked if the newspaper uses a web-hosting site like College Publisher for its online publication, respondents provided open-ended answers indicating the majority use either WordPress or College Publisher. One respondent reported using Gryphon/Detroit Softworks, and one uses a private server.

## Discussion

This study offers a glimpse of a unique subset of college media. The liberal arts institution seeks to impart broad general knowledge to its students, while student newspapers offer the ability to use that broad knowledge base in a professional or journalistic capacity. Likewise, only 37.5% of respondents in this study reported having a journalism program at their institution, and those who contributed to the student newspaper came from majors ranging from biology to philosophy. This broad range of academic backgrounds suggests a richness in the perspectives of these student publications. The content of the newspapers also varied, with some publications serving as the sole news source for the community outside the campus, while others only included news specifically relating to the campus community.

In other ways, the student newspapers from this study resemble the more traditional college publication model. A full 100% of respondents reported having advertising in their college newspapers, reinforcing the need for the bread and butter of the publication. The majority said they run five to 10 ads every edition. College-aged students represent a large portion of discretionary spending lusted for by advertisers. This is no less true today and in the environment of the liberal arts institution.

A mixed picture of the use of technology emerged with almost one-third of respondents reporting they did not have an online edition of the paper. Of those who do offer an online version, more than half of respondents do not report to update the content daily. It appears that

in this particular environment, little has changed since a half-decade ago when Bergland, Hon, Noe and Hartigan (2008) reported a little more than a third of college newspapers did not have an online presence. Today's Internet generation appears to be cleaving to the traditional print form of the student newspaper. This may be true, in part, because of the difficulty student newspapers have experienced in developing a strong advertising base for the online version of the publication. With the broader readership of the online newspaper comes the difficulty in convincing advertisers to invest in the medium.

Most publications were fewer than 10 pages and did have a faculty adviser to the publication. Of the schools that participated, a majority said there is no class credit associated with their publications. Also of interest, just more than half of respondents stated staff writers receive some form of compensation for their contributions to the publication; where this compensation comes from varies.

## Limitations

Since the sample for this study was small, inferential tests of broader significance based on the responses here cannot be generalized to other populations. Although the data reported here apply only to the liberal arts institutions in this study, the results are of conceptual significance. Little current research exists on the issues studied here, and it is important to use these findings as a starting point for a conversation about the state of college newspapers in the midst of such a rapidly transforming environment. By starting with studies such as this, we can better understand the field of student newspapers in the midst of a sea of change within the newspaper industry.

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## About the Author



*Lisa Lyon Payne is an assistant professor of communication at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Virginia. She is also the faculty adviser of the VWC student newspaper, The Marlin Chronicle. Lyon Payne obtained her doctorate from the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication in 1999. She has a master's degree in communication from the University of Tennessee and a bachelor's degree from The College of William and Mary. She has also taught as an assistant professor of communication at Kennesaw State University in Georgia and has published works on crisis communication, reputation management and public relations theory development. In addition to her academic experiences, Lyon Payne has worked as a public relations consultant, research analyst, editorial assistant and writer. Outside of her academic endeavors, she enjoys tennis, the beach and time with her husband and two sons.*