Creating community and gaining readers through newspaper blogs

Robin Roger

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Approved by:

Advisor: Philip Meyer

Reader: Paul Jones

Reader: Brian Carroll

ABSTRACT

ROBIN ROGER: Creating community and gaining readers through newspaper blogs

(Under the direction of Philip Meyer)

The purpose of this thesis is to seek evidence that newspaper blogs build a sense of community, and whether that has an effect on reading behavior. The researcher conducted a survey that included questions about the blogs people read, the blocks on which they live, and their reading behavior. Findings suggest that the effects of high levels of community are cumulative; therefore, creating a blogging community can draw new readers–great news for newspaper marketers. Results from the study also suggest a virtuous cycle: frequent blog reading seems to lead to a sense of community, and vice versa.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, 82 million Americans read news online. (Salwen, et al. 2005). This statistic could be good for print newspapers. Researchers found that people who read news online read a newspaper more days per week than people who do not read news online (Salwen et al.). Several studies, however, have found that the amount of time spent reading the printed newspaper has significantly decreased while time spent using the Web has increased (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Many different media compete for readers' attention, and it is clear that the Internet is not going away. In his report, *Future of Newspapers*, Kenneth Jost wrote: "A decade after its first surge of online editions, virtually everyone in or around a newspaper realizes that computers are a big part of the industry's future--and serving computer users may be the key to its long-term survival" (2006). Rather than viewing the Internet as a competitor, newspaper editors must see it as an opportunity.

One way to harness the possibilities is through weblogs, or blogs. Blogs have increased from an estimated 30,000 in 1998 to at least 3 million in 2004 (Amis, 2002). Pew put the number of users between 3 million and 9 million. The very people who use them, however, debate the exact definition of a blog. A blog can be an online journal, a list of notable links, or an online opinion column. Rebecca Blood wrote that the reverse chronological format determines whether a website is a blog (Blood, 2003). Hypertext and linking are also

trademarks, Blood wrote, and these lead to credibility and transparency--since they link to original articles and allow readers to form their own conclusions.

Blogs can also be online, or "virtual," communities. Community is another term with many definitions. Some definitions ground community in geographic spaces while others transcend geography and are based on shared values, knowledge, or interests. For the purpose of this thesis, relationships between people will constitute community while the blogs and newspaper studied are all grounded in a geographic space. This definition of community is based on that of McMillan and Chavis (1986), who stated that community has four parts: a feeling of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections.[1]

Today, many people blog as part of their jobs, discussing issues germane to their industries. Sun Microsystems[2] encourages its employees to blog and hosts more than 1,000 blogs on its website. Likewise, newspaper editors and reporters blog about issues at their newspapers or about stories they are covering.

As newspapers seek ways to remain vital, blogs have become among the latest experiments, including podcasting, RSS, and streaming video. Different newspapers use their blogs differently, but most of them aim to increase readership, or maintain existing readership while contributing to the democratic aim of the news media, which is to inform the public. Blogs have opened up discourse and created a many-to-many conversation, rather than the traditional one-to-many lecture style of mass communication (Carroll, 2004). Traditionally, the only way readers could voice their opinions was through the letters page. Of course, not all of the letters submitted are published, and some newspapers have a limit on

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[1] This definition is expanded upon on page 16.
[2] http://blogs.sun.com/roller/main.do

how often each letter writer can get published. With blogs, however, readers have countless opportunities to join the conversation.

Newspaper blogs also allow for transparency. Reporters can outline their writing process, explaining their newsgathering techniques and how they decided what to include and what to leave out. Editors can explain the stories they pick for the front page and the tough daily choices they make such as whether to run a sensitive photo. This transparency can create trust, something newspapers are losing.

On September 23, 2004, the Gallup News Service reported that the media's credibility had reached its lowest point in three decades (Gillespie, 2004). The organization released the results of a poll taken from Sept. 13 to 15, 2004, in which it asked participants: "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media--such as newspapers, T.V., and radio--when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly--a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?" Gillespie reported that 44% of respondents expressed confidence in the media, compared with 54% just the year before (Gillespie, 2004). In 1972, 68% said they had confidence in the media. In contrast, Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye found that blog users rated them as more credible than traditional media sources, including newspapers and broadcast news (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

The intersection of blogs and journalism

Many people debate the difference between blogs and journalism. Some bloggers claim they practice journalism while others cringe at the term "citizen journalism." Many bloggers view blogs as an alternative to the mainstream media. Some journalists view blogs as a threat to traditional journalistic standards (Carroll, 2004). Some bloggers claim they have stricter standards than journalists. Despite the crossover, there seems to be some healthy competition

between bloggers and journalists. Indeed, blogs and newspapers compete for readers and advertisers.

Blogs may also attract the younger, technologically savvy readers the newspapers are failing to reach. The difference in reading habits of the baby boomer generation and the members of generation Y are well documented (Meyer, 2004; Mindich, 2004; Stepp, 1996). Young readers want to interact with the news instead of receiving it passively (Pholig, 2003); they want a discussion, not a lecture (Carroll, 2004).

Despite the spirit of competition between blogs and mainstream media, many suggest the latter could benefit from the attributes of the former. Journalism professor Brian Carroll wrote that blogs are credible and personal, elements that newspapers should utilize (Carroll, 2004). "With personality and an online audience, meanwhile, comes a kind of reader interaction far more intense and personal than anything comparable in print," wrote Matt Welch (2003) in an article for *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Many writers in the trade journals refer to blogging as a survival strategy. Some have suggested that newspapers like the Greensboro *News & Record* in North Carolina started blogging to stem a landslide loss in circulation. The newspaper's editor has gained a lot of attention by making the newspaper's blogs a top priority. In "Letting the Blogs Out," Joe Strupp wrote about the experience of the editor at the Greensboro *News & Record,* John Robinson. While Robinson objects to being called a "radical," Strupp (2005) wrote, "To those who spend time thinking about how, even if newspapers will survive in a super-connected, empowered, non-intermediated, and--here's the word--blogified world, John Robinson is on the barricades."

Background – *News & Record* blogs

The Greensboro *News & Record* reported 109,848 Sunday circulation in September 2005, making it North Carolina's third largest newspaper. The paper is based in Greensboro, North Carolina, which has a population of roughly 224,000, and covers an area that stretches throughout the Piedmont region. Prior to the blog, the paper had been losing home county penetration steadily. In its home county--Guilford--the newspaper had a daily household penetration of 38% and a Sunday penetration of 45% in 2003[3]. This rate was down from 39% daily and 50% Sunday in 2000. In 1995, the paper had a daily household penetration of 46% and a Sunday penetration of 58%[4]. Some critics have suggested that the *News & Record's* blogging experiment was a last ditch effort to remedy the steady decline in penetration. Evidence suggests that the blogs may have plugged the leak. In September 2005, a year after the blogs were launched, home county penetration was 39% on weekdays and 45% on Sundays, nearly identical to the figures from 2003. The newspaper began blogging officially in August of 2004. There were actually two staff members blogging already, but editor John Robinson joined their ranks with his first post and declared that blogging at the newspaper would be a priority. The blogs became a feature on the homepage of the newspaper's website, www.news-record.com.

It all started when Robinson and managing editor Ann Morris asked city editor Mark Sutter to investigate readership initiatives--ways to keep old readers and attract new ones. He came back with a report that called for the creation of a "Town Square," a "trusted place where people gather to read, write, report the news, debate issues of the day, get shopping information, and, generally, engage in civic discourse" (Mitchell, 2005).

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[3] Penetration is circulation divided by the number of households.
[4] Audit Bureau of Circulations, County Penetration Reports.

The newspaper staff decided the best way to do that was through the Internet, and staff member Lex Alexander was commissioned to research possible methods of creating an online community of readers. He began by asking the readers of his blog what they thought the newspaper should do. He received several responses. A full account can be found in the archives of his blog, the Lex Files, from January 2005. His full report can also be found online and downloaded in Word document form. [5]

Alexander grouped the recommendations into five categories: community, interactivity, site alterations, transparency, and revenue. The first category dealt with better coverage of community news and recruiting bloggers from different neighborhoods. Interactivity included allowing comments on articles, creating a letters-to-the-editor blog, and making links to supplemental sources mandatory. Recommendations for altering the site included suggestions such as making archives available online for free and offering a downloadable version of the paper online. To increase transparency, Alexander suggested staff members blog editorial-board or budget meetings and that each reporter and editor have a page online with a photo, biography, and contact information. His suggestions for creating revenue included using Blogads (an online ad service), hosting auctions, and creating searchable classifieds online, like craigslist.org.

Not all of Alexander's suggestions have come to fruition, but many have, and many are still in the works. As of April 2006, the newspaper hosted 18 blogs. Popular blogs include The Editor's Log, Letters to the Editor, The Chalkboard (about local education), and a photo blog. The editor said the *News & Record* does not require staff members to blog. Instead, they encourage all who are interested to start a blog. The staff has also actively recruited

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[5] http://blog.news-record.com/staff/lexblog/archives/2005/01/index.html

residents of neighborhoods to blog about their areas, resulting in "Hometown Hubs." Staff members blog voluntarily, on their own time, and receive no extra pay for their time blogging. Robinson has said he prefers staff members to generate their own blog topics, rather than assigning them, because then the posts are more vibrant and authentic.

Key among Robinson's aims, he said, was to build community (personal communication November 10, 2005). In a blog entry dated December 20, 2004, he wrote "My still-evolving observation is that bloggers and newspapers want basically the same thing: to tell people the news…. It's not threatening; it's invigorating. And it feeds one of our fundamental purposes, which is to help build a strong community through the free exchange of information and ideas."

The blogs at the *News & Record* are pinned on high hopes. Those who blog hope they can help newspapers gain credibility, as they reveal the process and decision making that goes into the newspaper. Blogs can also give the newspaper a personality. Blogs allow readers to see reporters and editors as real people, rather than bylines and headshots. They can also help foster a sense of community. This sense of community could lead to feelings of loyalty, and increase or maintain newspaper readership, even if it is solely online. They can also encourage repeat visitors to the newspaper's website, readers who may not subscribe to the print version of the newspaper.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newspapers and community

Some scholars have studied the role newspapers play in creating a sense of community

(Anderson, 1983) while others have studied the relationship amongst community

membership, newspaper use, and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Fleming, et al., 2005). In

Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson wrote that a newspaper created a national

identity, or an imagined community, uniting people from a large geographic area through

shared information (Anderson, 1983). Though these people didn't know each other

personally, Anderson claimed, they shared a sense of community.

It stands to reason that, if readers share a sense of community with those who create the

newspaper, they will have a greater level of trust in what they read in it and how the

newspaper will represent them. As an example, Putnam wrote about the foreign-language

newspapers that arose from cohesive Italian, Jewish, and Polish immigrant groups (Putnam,

2000). These papers, which directly address a specific community's needs, can be used as a

model for a newspaper that facilitates community building.

Putnam found those who read the newspaper tended to exhibit higher levels of civic

engagement. In *Bowling Alone*, he noted that

> Regular newspaper readers belong to more organizations, participate more
> actively in clubs and civic associations, attend local meetings more frequently,
> vote more regularly, volunteer work on community projects more often, and even

visit with friends more frequently and trust their neighbors more. (Putnam, 2000, p. 218).

One could argue that the members of a community who read the newspaper feel empowered by the information they gain from it, and believe that their voices and efforts can make a difference in community life. Advocates of public journalism, also known as civic journalism, argue that journalism cannot remain a vital part of people's lives unless public life remains viable (Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1993; Lambeth, et al., 1998). Journalists need to do whatever they can to keep people involved in civic life. If people are not engaged in public life, then they will not feel the need to stay informed. If they don't believe their votes--or their opinions--count, then what's the point of reading the newspaper?

In a paper on public journalism published by The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, Roy Peter Clark asks two questions: "How can we create newspapers that give readers not just information, but a deeper sense of identity and membership in communities?," and "How can the newspaper improve the quality of public conversation in a community, and not just on the editorial page?" (Rosen, 1993). Blogs can help answer both those questions.

Blogs offer one method of keeping citizens actively engaged and interested in public life. One might consider newspaper blogs the new experiment in public journalism. Those involved in the public journalism movement sought to shatter the top-down paradigm and allow citizens to speak their minds. Bloggers attempt to do the same thing. Individual bloggers have offered their posts as alternatives to the mainstream media, but blogs don't need to be antithetical to traditional media. They can accomplish the same things public journalists tried to accomplish with their town meetings, reader interviews, and neighborhood roundtables.

Blogs can provide additional opportunities for civic engagement, and they can revolutionize the way people use the media. In his book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People For the People,* Dan Gillmor wrote, "For the first time in modern history, the user is truly in charge, as a consumer and as a producer" (2004, p. 139). The author compares blogs to letters to the editor, which allow voices from outside the newsroom to be heard.

Blogs and online communities

Researchers have studied online, or "virtual," communities since the Web was popularized in the 1990s. They have found evidence to support that people behave much the same way online as they do in physical communities, and that they can benefit from online community-building (Surman & Wershler-Henry, 2001; Wellman, 2001; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Since it is difficult to define community, it can be hard to determine what elements of a website or blog contribute to community. Jenny Preece breaks down the components in *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability* (Preece, 2000). According to Preece, an online community consists of people interacting socially, a shared purpose, policies that guide interactions, and computer systems that support and mediate these interactions. The *News & Record* blogs contain all these qualities. In the preface to her book, Preece wrote: "In a time of technological turbulence and increasing social isolation, we still can construct technologies that shape communities across the world and draw people together in a positive way." Preece focuses on virtual communities, but the *News & Record* blog community is also grounded in a very real geographic community. Perhaps the strength of the former can enhance the latter.

Alberto Ibargüen (2006), president of the Knight Foundation, spoke about the importance

of the newspaper's community-building aspect in his speech, "A foundation for the future of

journalism and communities." He described the type of projects the foundation looks to fund,

and stressed the importance of keeping the newspaper's efforts grounded in the physical

community. He said:

> Since the medium matters, we intend to act something like a venture capitalist
> and will seek to fund ideas that will do what Knight newspapers were intended to
> do: to connect community, to make sense of things in our physical geography.
> We want to fund ideas that will share information and make what happens in my
> part of town something that happened in your town because we learned it from
> the same source. Whereas the beauty of newspapers was precisely its mile-wide,
> inch-deep capacity to bond and broadcasts capacity to blanket, the Internets great
> talent is the capacity to drill a mile deep an inch wide at a time. Wed like to fund
> ideas that will turn it on its head and help create not virtual community, but
> geographic community, where, after all, we all still live.

Anita Blanchard (2004) surveyed blog readers to determine whether they had a sense of

community. She studied the Julie/Julia Project, a 2004 blog written by New York secretary

Julie Powell. The blog documented Powell's trials and triumphs while trying to cook

everything in Julia Child's book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Blanchard applied a

Sense of Community Index questionnaire (see below) to create a survey, changing the words

"block" to "blog." She then administered the survey to the blog readers. Blanchard concluded

that a moderate sense of community existed on the blog.[6] The blog was based on a personal

experiment with cooking, however, and not intended to engender democratic debate and

discussion, as are the *News & Record* blogs.

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[6] The blog – found at http://blogs.salon.com/0001399/ - became a memoir: "Julie and Julia:
365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen," by Julie Powell. (2005). NY: Little,
Brown.

Sense of Community

McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed the Sense of Community Index Blanchard used in

her study. They based their definition of community on sociologist Seymour Sarason's 1974

book *Psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a community psychology.* They

wrote: "Sense of Community is a feeling that members have of belonging, 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." Many researchers have used their Sense of

Community Index, but some have questioned its reliability. A recent study concluded that the

index provided a good foundation on which to build measures of sense of community

(Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). The authors underscored the fact that McMillan and Chavis

designed the SCI to measure adults' sense of community in a residential setting. The index

items are:

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.

The sense of community McMillan and Chavis describe contains four elements: a feeling

of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections. These

four elements are usually applied to face-to-face communities, but researchers have found

evidence of these elements in virtual communities (Preece, 2000). Blanchard appears to be

the only one to apply the SCI to a blog, but Peter Forster (2004) applied it to virtual communities and compared it to communities of place.

Philip Meyer addressed the second element, influence, in his article "Learning to Love Lower Profits" (1995). Newspapers are not as much in the information business, he wrote, as they are the influence business. They need to stop thinking of themselves as being in the information business, he wrote. He added that "the quickest way to gain influence... is by becoming a trusted and reliable provider of information" (Meyer, 1995, p. 41). If a newspaper wishes to increase that trust, Meyer suggested it do this by "improving services to readers, hiring more skilled writers and reporters, [and] taking leadership roles in fostering democratic debate" (1995, p. 41). The *News & Record* blogs have hosted several debates on issues of concern to local readers. More than any other newspaper feature, the blogs give readers a chance to voice their opinion unedited (except for obscenities and libelous statements). The influence Meyer wrote about, however, is flipped on its ear. Instead of the newspaper simply influencing its readers, the blogs give readers the chance to influence what goes into the newspaper. McMillan and Chavis asserted that the influence in their sense of community model works in both directions. They wrote that members of a group must feel they have influence over the group, just as the group needs influence over its members to assure cohesiveness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Social capital

Since 1916, sociologists have used the term "social capital" to describe networks among people (Lin, 2001). The term disappeared, but re-emerged in the 1980s and became popular when Robert Putnam lamented the decline of social capital in his book *Bowling Alone*. Definitions vary, but research has shown the benefits of social capital include improved

academic performance, increased job contacts, and better physical health (Granovetter 1985). Studies have shown that social capital and democracy are mutually beneficial (Paxton, 2002). Some scholars have criticized the overly positive literature on social capital theory, however, pointing to the negative aspects of social capital (Fiorina 1999; Paxton 2002; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000, pp. 350-363). A gang is a network of individuals, after all, with a great deal of social capital. In this thesis, however, the researcher will conceptualize social capital as the benefits individuals reap from online interactions.

Not until the last two decades has the idea of social capital been applied to information technology (Huysman, 2004). Some scholars have claimed that members of virtual communities can enjoy the same social capital as members of physical communities (Lin, 2001). Researchers have also found that social contact on the Internet can augment face-to-face social capital by encouraging participation in voluntary organizations (Quan-Haase, et al., 2002). Quan-Haase et al. broke social capital down into three categories: network capital, civic engagement, and sense of community. The authors found that the more people use the Internet, the greater sense of community they had online, which could lead to social cohesion. Frequent Internet use did not, however, weaken individuals' sense of community in their geographic communities, as some feared it would.

Business Translation

So what does this mean for business? Well, if newspapers can create a sense of community, they can engage readers in civic life, and make the newspaper required reading. If the newspaper continues to wield influence, it may also continue to make money. In her article on letters to the editor, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) wrote about two visions of the letters section, one that has a democratic mission, and the other that serves a customer service

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function. Though the letters page exists to create public debate, it can also help the credibility of the newspaper and help increase circulation, she wrote. She quoted an editor who described it well: "Letters to the editor help foster a sense of community. A newspaper is a business, and we have to make a profit as a community newspaper. We can only do that if it feels like we're helping out the community."

Making a profit and serving the greater good are not mutually exclusive goals. Philip Meyer has written that, for Henry Ford, "Profit was just a by-product of the service to society that his company performed." He added that all Ford wanted was "To have a little fun and do the most good for the most people and the stockholders" (Meyer, 2004, pp. 10-11). The authors of *Profits with Principles* argue that profit is a mean, rather than an end, and businesses must pursue purpose beyond profit (Jackson and Nelson, 2004). They state:

> Courageous, purpose-driven, values-based leadership can enhance commercial performance, encourage innovation, improve brand recognition and reputation, build trust, and underpin competitive edge. Even when you can't make a "business case" for it, it is important in its own right. (Jackson and Nelson, 2004, p. 347).

The importance of value was highlighted in the media business in a competition between two newspapers. When Clarity Media Group announced they would launch a free newspaper in Baltimore in October 2005, a spokesman for *The Baltimore Sun* said the newspaper was not worried about the new competition:

> "We serve more than 1.2 million readers each week," said Williams, the spokesman for The Sun. "Our advertisers know that The Sun is the best way to reach the Baltimore market. And as long as we continue to deliver value, we believe our readers and advertisers will continue to reach for The Sun" (Madigan, 2005).

Conclusion

Researchers have begun studying news sites and their interactive features, but blogs are new territory (Gubman & Greer, 1997; Schultz, 1999). Besides Blanchard's study of the Julie/Julia Project, no research exists about the sense of community potentially created by a blog. Since newspaper blogs are relatively new, they present uncharted territory for research. Many newspapers have created blogs on their websites, but they have no empirical evidence that they work. If editors and publishers are hoping to reach out to readers by creating a sense of community, as the people at the *News & Record* are hoping, then a study must be conducted to measure the sense of community on current newspaper blogs. If these newspaper blogs create a sense of community, they can create social capital in the short term, which furthers the democratic aim of newspapers.

Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold. One purpose is to explore whether newspaper blogs create a sense of community and if so, whether that sense of community has an effect on reading behavior. The definition of community used in this thesis will focus on relationships between people (see page 12). The other purpose is to experiment with different ways of sampling from a specific blog reader population. Two methods were used: an opt-in method to reach anonymous readers, and an invitation to reach those who leave their e-mail addresses on the blog. One of the aims of this thesis is to compare results from the two different sampling methods. The researcher has conducted a survey based on the Sense of Community Index, including questions about the *News & Record* blog the respondent reads and the block on which they live. The data from the survey will help to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the *News & Record* blogs foster a sense of community among readers?

2. Is there a relationship between sense of community and reading behavior (either of the blog and print newspapers)?

3. Are different methods of gathering samples on blogs linked to different responses or different response rates?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The Greensboro *News & Record* blogs formed the basis for this study. Since the history of the Greensboro *News & Record* blogs has been well documented, and editor John Robinson has written extensively on their purpose and aims, the newspaper is ripe for this type of study. The researcher conducted a survey (see Appendix) of the *News & Record* blog readers to determine whether the blogs have created a sense of community. Chief among Robinson's stated goals is increasing a sense of community among those who read the blogs.

The survey included measures from the Sense of Community Index developed by McMillan and Chavis. While researchers continue to search for consistent sense of community measures, the Sense of Community Index, designed by McMillan and Chavis tends to be the most well regarded and well researched (Blanchard). The questions were adapted, and terms like "neighborhood" were replaced with blog. The new 12 items were:

I. 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 the 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 read it can 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.

In addition to the questions about the blog the respondent reads, the survey contained the 12

index questions about the physical block on which the respondent lives, to provide a baseline

(see page 12). The 12 items measuring community on one's physical block were:

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.

These answers allowed the researcher to compare the sense of community the respondent

reports online to the sense of community he or she reports in the physical community.

Questions from the John S. and James Knight Foundation's Community Indicators Survey

were also added. The researcher employed closed-ended Likert scales with options ranging

from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The answers were subjected to analysis to

determine relationships between the variables and produce frequencies and crosstabs for

comparisons. The survey was designed using Sawtooth software and was hosted on

University of North Carolina web space. Consent information appeared at the beginning of

the survey and consent was given by participation in the survey.

First, the researcher invited 200 people to participate in the study. These people were

identified through the *News & Record* blogs. Anyone who posted a comment and left a valid

e-mail address between August 2004 and February 2006 was contacted by e-mail, invited to

fill out a survey, and given a random user ID and password. Thirty-one e-mails were returned

as undeliverable. The survey was open for two weeks, and reminder e-mails were sent during

that time to those who had not yet filled one out. This e-mail included a user ID and password, a link to the survey, and a deadline by which they had to participate. At the end of two weeks, 52 of the 200 people invited completed a survey, yielding a response rate of a little more than 25%.

After the deadline, the researcher downloaded the data and reset the survey, without user IDs and passwords. Then, all those who read the *News & Record* blogs were invited to fill out a survey. The researcher posted a link to the survey on the *News & Record* blogs every day for two weeks. These postings resulted in a self-selected sample, giving equal opportunity to anyone who read the blogs during that time frame. This method produced 24 additional cases. These cases were labeled as non-password cases and combined with the original data set to create a sample of 76 participants. There could be some redundancy, because more than one of the surveys in the second group could have been completed by the same person. Also, respondents from the first group who did not meet the deadline might have filled out the survey when it was posted without requiring a password or user ID.

Sampling

Because of the method in which participants were recruited, the resulting sample was a possibility sample, and not a probability sample. Traditional survey methods create problems when trying to reach blog readers, since most of them are untraceable. Those who leave their full names or e-mail addresses are accessible, but that number leaves out the uncounted number of people who read the blogs, or lurk, without posting. (Traditional newspaper readers could be considered lurkers because they do not interact with the paper.) These lurkers may fill out a survey, however, with the condition of anonymity. Since the population being studied is a technologically savvy one, it makes sense to send the survey electronically

and post it to the blogs they read. It does, however, leave much up to chance. In addition, whenever researchers attempt to survey Internet users, they must acknowledge that samples are representative not of the population in general but of that portion with Internet access. This can result in sampling bias because the portion of people with Internet access cannot be expected to respond in the same manner as those who do not. Research has shown that those with Internet access are more highly educated, have more money, and are often younger than those who do not. Race and gender also make a difference in terms of access to the Internet. Therefore, problems of coverage are often noted when critiquing online surveys. Coverage does not present as much of a problem in this study because it only proposes to make inferences about the population reading the *News & Record* blogs online, a population that has Internet access. No generalizations will be made about the public at large.

Beyond the problem of coverage is the problem of sampling error. As Mick Couper (2000) noted in his article "Web Surveys: A review of issues and approaches," it is impossible to create a representative sample when one cannot identify those in the sampling frame. By and large, those who use the Internet are untraceable. Since there is no standardized format for e-mail addresses yet, one cannot replicate the process of Random Digit Dialing. In his book *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, Don Dillman (2000) writes that strictly online-only surveys are still an inadequate way to gather information about the general public. He does, however, advocate a mixed-mode method with which respondents have several choices of how to respond to a survey. Dillman wrote that someone has yet to create a reliable method of collecting a representative online sample. Likewise, phone surveys are becoming decreasingly useful.

Many public opinion researchers and, notably, many techies have taken on the challenge of creating a methodology with much excitement. In his article on Web surveys, Couper (2000) outlines seven different types of Internet surveys: (1) Web surveys as entertainment, (2) self-selected surveys, (3) opt-in volunteer panels, (4) intercept surveys (where every *n*th visitor is invited to complete the survey), (5) list-based samples of high-coverage populations, mixed-mode survey (where respondents have an online option), (6) Mixed-mode designs with a choice to complete the survey online, and (7) pre-recruited panels of Internet users.

The first three methods result in non-probability samples, and the second is the biggest threat to legitimate social science research, Couper claims, because those who carry out these surveys claim scientific validity. Basically, he equates this type of survey to a poll on a website like www.CNN.com or a newspaper like *USA Today*, that anyone can fill it out. The results of the poll are certainly neither scientific nor representative of the opinions of the general population, but they can provide an idea of what respondents think. The danger, Couper wrote, is that many claim these surveys produce scientific evidence. For example, the *National Geographic* website posted a link to its "Survey 2000" on its website and shut it down when it had received 50,000 responses, stating that it had acquired twice the number of responses required for scientific validity. As so many authors point out, quantity does not equal quality. There is also no way of determining a response rate, unless one can identify the total number of people who visited the site while the link to the survey was posted. The obvious benefits to this method are the cost (close to nothing) and the time it takes to cull information. This method was used in the self-selected portion of the study, which resulted in 24 cases.

Limitations of this study result from an uncertain response rate, among other things. Since the total population is unknowable, it will be impossible to determine a response rate. The number of hits received by each blog is available, but these numbers do not reflect unique visitors. A response rate could be calculated for the 200 e-mails sent, but this is a small population from which to start. Those who elect to complete the survey may not be representative of the total population, but this is the case in any survey.

In every case, there are disadvantages to creating samples for Internet surveys. Since spam has proliferated, people are much less likely now to read an e-mail from someone they do not know. A way to avoid that is to add authority by sending the e-mail from an institution rather than a person. Studies have shown that personalization may have some effect on potential participants, but nowadays so much spam is personalized that it hardly sets e-mail messages apart. Other things to consider are people's privacy, data security, and the effect of the design survey on the participant.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

When evaluating the results of this study, one must keep in mind that the survey produced exploratory research. Because blogs are so new, there is a need for exploratory research to provide baselines for future research. The small sample size (76, with possible redundancies) and the fact that it is a possibility, rather than a probability sample, means that results cannot be used to make generalizations about the public at large, or even about the portion of the public who read the Greensboro *News & Record* blogs. They can, however, give a sense of how those who chose to respond to the survey think about the blogs. These results can serve as a stepping stone to future research with a probability sample of blog readers. In *Exploratory Data Analysis*, John W. Tukey (1977) wrote about the virtues of exploratory analysis. He wrote, "Unless exploratory data analysis uncovers indications, usually quantitative ones, there is likely to be nothing for confirmatory data analysis to consider" (p. 3). He also wrote that exploratory research is a search for data indications rather than causality. One should not infer from the following analysis that causality is assumed where correlation exists. The results can only address the question "what seems to be happening?" Whether or not it truly *is* happening will be left to future researchers.

Likewise, *p* values are shown to demonstrate the likelihood that a specific result is due to chance. A *p* value <.05 is ideal in showing that there is a 95% confidence that the null hypothesis is false. *P* values of .1 or .15 indicate a 90% or 85% confidence level, respectively, meaning that the results with these values have a greater likelihood that they are

due to chance alone. *P* values higher than .05 may be permissible in a study with such a small sample size. Abelson (1995, p. 40) stated that with very large samples, "small effects can readily achieve extreme significance levels" of $p = .0001$ or .00001. If the reverse is true, low *p* values are even harder to come by with a small sample. Therefore, our expectations in this exploratory, small-sample study will be appropriate for the *p* value achieved. In addition, Tukey argued that since the null hypothesis is never literally true, lower *p* values may be admissible. He suggested in the case of a *p* value higher than .05, but less than .15, one might say in that case that "the difference between A and B *leans* in the positive direction. For $.15 < p < .25$, he proposed stating that there is a *hint* about the direction" (Abelson, 1995, p. 74). The words *hint* and *lean* allow different degrees of uncertainty, as opposed to the traditional method of rejecting anything with a *p* value higher than .05.

Findings

Those blog readers who responded are mostly male, middle class, middle aged, and highly educated. Of those who participated, 63.5% are male, and 36.5% are female. The median age is 43 and the mean age is 44 (SD 12.5). The oldest person is 87 while the youngest is 22. Forty-seven percent of respondents are college graduates, and 34% have post-graduate or professional education beyond college. (According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 34% of the adult population of Guilford County held a bachelor's degree or higher, and the per capita income was $23,000 in 2000.) In the survey, the middle income category was $40,000 a year to less than $60,000. Thirty percent of respondents were in the middle category, and 44% made $60,000 or more. A majority of the respondents (78%) are employed full-time. All of them are registered to vote, indicating at least some level of political interest. Most of the

respondents consider themselves politically moderate while 30% consider themselves

conservative, and 25% consider themselves liberal.

Sense of community

Respondents were given 12 statements about the *News & Record* blog they read most often

and were asked whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, felt neutral, agreed, or strongly

agreed. Eight of the items were positive statements, and four were negative. In data analysis,

the values for the four negative statements were reversed so that high values reflected a

positive sentiment. For example, the eighth statement read, "I have no influence over what

this blog is like." The values from this question were subtracted from six to produce a

number reflecting a positive or negative bias. The 12 items were then used to create a Blog

Community Index, and all but one variable were highly intercorrelated. The second

statement, "People on this blog do not share the same values," was not as highly correlated as

the other 11 items. With this variable included, the index yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .69, a

fair indication that the items are measuring the same underlying concept. When this second

variable was excluded, the 11 remaining variables yielded a somewhat higher Cronbach's

alpha of .72. This number exceeds the commonly used standard for exploratory research,

which is .7. In order to compare the scores from the Blog Community Index and the Block

Community Index, however, all 12 items were included. To measure a sense of community,

these 12 measures were joined to form the Blog Community Index.

A score for the index was developed by condensing the responses to the 12 statements.

First, respondents' answers to each statement in the index were recoded to yield a positive or

negative answer. A value of 0 was assigned to the values where a respondent disagreed, and a

value of 1 represented values in which the respondents agreed. Since a neutral response

meant the respondent did not agree, it was included with the two disagree responses in the 0 column. In shorthand, a value of 1 represented a positive sense of community while a value of 0 represented a lack of a positive sense.

Another variable was created to reflect the sum of the answers to the 12 variables forming the index and create a score for the index. The value from each statement was added, and respondents could receive a score from 0 to 12 on the Blog Community Index. The mean score for the Blog Community Index was 5.4 out of a possible 12. This demonstrates a nearly 50/50 split. It does not indicate a particularly strong sense of community, but it does not demonstrate a complete lack of it.

The midpoint of the Blog Community Index was between 5 and 6 on the 12-point scale. This midpoint became the cutoff for a binary variable. All those who scored a 5 or less received a value of 1 while all those who scored a 6 or higher received a value of 2. So, 1 represented a low sense of community while 2 represented a high sense of community. This variable was used to compare with different variables in 2x2 tables.

The Block Community Index was intended to serve as a baseline with which to compare the Blog Community Index. Like the latter, the Block Community Index contained 12 statements: eight positive and four negative (see page 18). These statements are from McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Sense of Community Index and they measure the sense of community respondents share with people who live on the same block. Participants were asked to which degree they agreed with the statement, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). All 12 of these items were highly correlated, having a Cronbach's alpha of .81. The same process as above was followed for the Block Community Index. The mean score for the Block Community Index was a 7.7 out of 12. The midpoint of the Block

Community Index was between 7 and 8 on a 12-point scale. This midpoint was used to divde the results into two categories: those who had a relatively high sense of community, and those who had a low sense of community. It is noteworthy that the average score for the Block Community Index is higher than the average score for the Blog Community Index which was 5.4. When the two indexes were compared, a paired-samples t test revealed that the two are not measuring the same thing, and in fact may have opposite effects on reading behavior. The mean difference between the two scores is -2.1905. There is significant evidence ($p = .000$) that there is a real difference in the indicated direction of the two indexes.

One thing the two indexes had in common was that neither duration of time reading the blogs nor duration of time living on a block determined the level of a sense of community. The duration of time reading the blogs did not seem to have a significant impact on a reader's sense of community on the blogs ($t = -.080, p = .937$). Likewise, time spent living on a particular block did not seem to have an impact on respondents' sense of community on that block ($t = -.706, p = .482$). This finding indicates that other factors have a greater influence on one's sense of community. Perhaps more frequent interaction with neighbors, and not length of time living next to them, makes one more at home, and more interaction with other blog readers, not length of time reading the blogs, makes one more at home on the blogs. Therefore, reading behavior was compared with the sense of community indexes to determine whether that had an affect on respondents' scores.

Reading behavior

Reading behavior was measured with three dimensions: how often participants read the blogs, how often they visited the website, and whether or not they subscribed to the print

version of the newspaper (or how often they subscribed, and how often they read if they did not subscribe). Results illustrated that a majority of respondents were frequent visitors to their blog of choice. Most people visited their favorite *News & Record* blog once a week (29%), and many visited at least once a day (56%). A majority of people (57%) said they have read the blogs for 10 months or more.

A majority of respondents also visit the *News & Record* website often: 64% said they visit the website every day, and 15% visit at least once a week. Many of the respondents also reported an increase in visits to the website since before the blogs were implemented. Only 24% said they visited the website once a day before the blogs, and 24% said they visited the website once a week before the blogs. About a quarter of the respondents (23%) reported that they never visited the website before the blogs, compared with 4% who say they never visit the website now. (Although, this raises the question, if they don't visit the website, how do they read the blogs? Technology makes it possible. RSS [Really Simple Syndication] has grown in popularity, and now readers are able to receive the latest posts using an RSS feed without even visiting the site itself).

An almost equal percentage of blog readers subscribe to the paper. Of those who responded to the survey, 50% said they subscribe to the newspaper seven days a week while 10% subscribe on weekends. Another 10% said they read the newspaper regularly but don't subscribe, and 16% said they read it occasionally but don't subscribe. The remaining 15% said they rarely or never read the newspaper.

How often they read the blogs

The variable measuring how often respondents read the blog was recoded to yield two values, reflecting those who read the blog daily and those who read the blog less often (once

a week or less). This variable was compared to the Blog Community Index scores. When the

binary Blog Community Index was compared with how often people read the blogs in a

crosstab, the results are still highly significant, and it is highly unlikely they are due to

chance (Figure 1). Of those who said they perceived a high sense of community on the blogs,

74% said they read them daily. Of those who said they did not perceive a high sense of

community, 41% said they read the blogs every day.

Figure 1   Blog Community Index and frequency of reading blogs

	Low Sense of Community		High Sense of Community	
Read blogs daily	14	41%	26	74%
Read blogs less often	20	59%	9	26%
Total	34	100%	34	100%

Chi Square = 7.760, p = .005

To create a continuous scale for use in a t test, the ordinal answers were converted into visits

per month, so that "at least once a day" became 30, "at least once a week" became 10, "once

every two weeks became 2, "once a month" became 1, and "once every three months"

became 0. A t test showed that those with a high score on the Blog Community Index

reported reading the blogs an average of 25 times a month, compared to 17 times a month for

those with a low score on the index (p = .002).

It is not clear in which direction causation runs. It may even run both ways in a positive

feedback loop--reading blogs (or, more so, interacting, responding, and discussing issues on

the blogs) promotes community, and sense of community drives people to the blogs. This

interaction could constitute a virtuous cycle, where aptitude to interact leads to a likelihood

of reporting community online, and vice versa. The willingness to identify one's self on the

blogs (represented here by those given passwords) might also contribute to the cycle,

yielding higher levels of community and more interaction. Those who read the blogs and do

not interact might be left out of this cycle. Of course, the table shows the same strong

relationship either way, but for clarity, here it is with the blog reading as the independent

variable. The resulting crosstab showed that the majority of those who said they read the blog

at least once a day also reported a high sense of community. Of those who read the blogs

once a day, 65% scored high on the Blog Community Index, compared with 31% of those

who read the blogs less frequently (Figure 2).

Figure 2   Frequency of reading blogs and Blog Community Index

	Read blogs daily		Read blogs less often	
Low Sense of Community	14	35%	20	69%
High Sense of Community	26	65%	9	31%
Total	40	100%	29	100%

Chi Square = 7.760, *p* = .005

Another *t* test was performed to discover whether respondents' scores on the Blog

Community Index could predict how often they read the blog. The continuous blog index

was used, with scores from 1 to 12. The results proved to be significant at the p =.002 level,

which means that it is highly unlikely that the results are due to chance, despite the small

sample size. Those who read the blogs daily had a mean score of 6.18 on the Blog

Community Index (out of 12), compared with a mean score of 4.34 for those who read the

blogs less often.

One might assume that some other factor such as age, education, or income might predict

how often respondents read the blogs. The results were tested for confounding variables, to

determine if the daily blog reading was caused by some other variable. Through *t* tests, it was

determined that education, age, and gender have no significant influence on how often

respondents read the blogs. There is also no significant relationship between age and whether

a respondent scores high or low on the Blog Community Index. There was no relationship

either between whether or not a participant subscribed to the print product and how often he

or she read the blogs.

How often they visit the website

A comparison was made between scores on the Blog Community Index and how often respondents visited the *News & Record* website. A crosstab revealed that of those who had a high sense of community, 77% visited the website at least once a day, compared with 53% of those who had a low sense of community (Figure 3).

Figure 3   **Blog Community Index and frequency of visiting website**

	Low Sense of Community		High Sense of Community	
Visit website daily	18	53%	27	77%
Visit website less often	16	47%	8	23%
Total	34	100%	35	100%

Chi Square = 4.453, *p* = .035

Again, the ordinal answers were changed into a continuous scale, so that "at least once a day" became 30, "at least once a week" became 10, "once every two weeks became 2, "once a month" became 1, and "once every three months" became 0. Those with a high score on the Blog Community Index visited the website an average of 25 times a month, compared with 19 times a month for those who scored low on the index (*p* = .049).

Whether they subscribe

A crosstab revealed that of those with a high sense of community on the blog, 68% subscribed to the newspaper, compared with 47% of those with a low sense of community on the blog (Figure 4). While this result only hints at significance, a *t* test, taking advantage of greater power of the scaled items, gives us more confidence that the difference is real (leaning toward significance at *p* = .104).

Figure 4   **Blog Community Index and whether readers subscribe**

	Low Sense of Community		High Sense of Community	
Subscription to paper	17	50%	23	66%
No subscription	17	50%	12	34%
Total	34	100%	35	100%

Chi Square = 1.748, *p* = .186

The evidence here supports the thesis that those who perceive a high sense of community on the blogs read the blogs more frequently, visit the *News & Record* website more often, and are more likely to subscribe to the print edition. Perhaps a good sense of physical community will have similar implications for reading behavior. Though the Blog Community Index and Block Community Index are not closely correlated (Figure 5), the next section will investigate whether they have similar effects.

Figure 5   Relationship between the two indexes
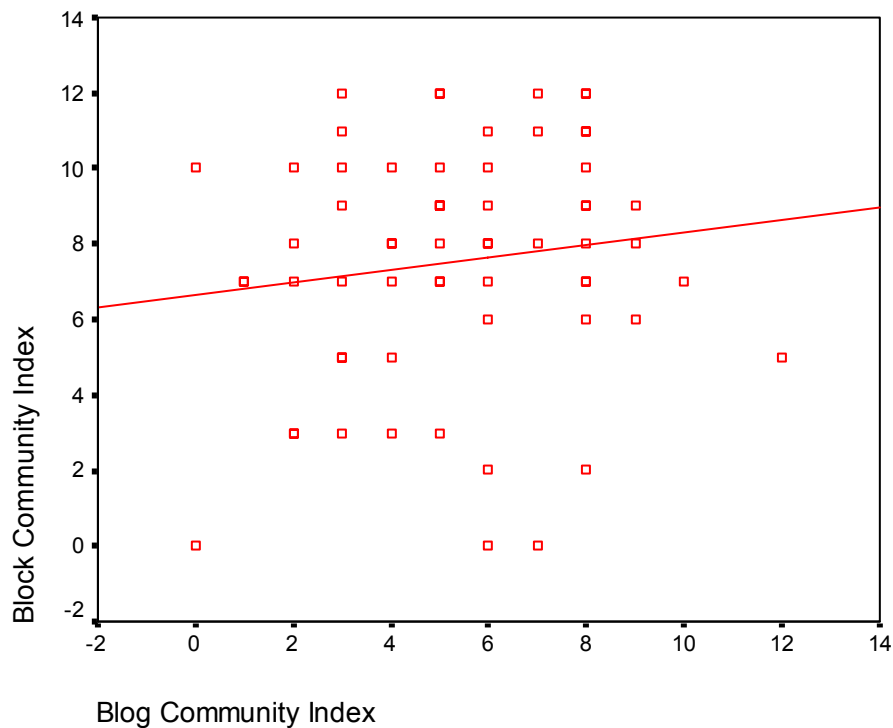

Figure 5. The relationship between the Blog Community Index and Block Community Index.

R = .134, R square = .02   y = 6.669 + .134x

Block Community Index

The Block Community Index had the opposite effect on blog reading behavior. Those who scored high on the Block Community Index tended to read the blogs less frequently. Of those

who scored high on the index, 46% read the blogs daily, compared to 62% who scored low

on the index (although the *p* value only hints at significance) (Figure 6).

Figure 6   Block Community Index and whether readers read blogs daily

	Low Sense of Community		High Sense of Community	
Read blogs daily	18	62%	18	46%
Read blogs less often	11	38%	21	54%
Total	29	100%	39	100%

Chi Square = 1.691, *p* = .193

The mean Block Community Index score for someone who read the blogs daily was a 7.03

out of 12, compared with an 8.38 out of 12 for those who read the blogs less frequently. The

more often one reads the blogs, the lower the sense of physical community (at *p* =.072).

What could this mean? Is the virtual community distracting people from their real

community? Does this pose a danger for newspapers? Are the blogs counter-productive? Or

is a blog community better than none--and therefore a positive factor for society?

There was no significant relationship between how respondents scored on the Block

Community Index and how often they visited the website (*p* = .964). As one would imagine,

however, there was a relationship between whether one subscribed to the paper and his or her

sense of community in the physical community. When sense of community was used as the

independent variable, a crosstab revealed that 69% of those who scored high on the Block

Community Index subscribed to the paper while only 45% of those who scored low on the

index subscribed (Figure 7). These numbers mirror the comparison between the blog sense of

community index and the frequency of blog reading.

Figure 7   Block Community Index and whether readers subscribe

	Low Sense of Community		High Sense of Community	
Subscription	13	45%	27	69%
No subscription	16	55%	12	31%
Total	29	100%	39	100%

Chi Square = 4.089, *p* = .043

Of those who subscribed to the newspaper, 68% said they held a high sense of community on

their physical block, and only 43% of non-subscribers held a high sense of community

(Figure 8). Again, length of time living on a block did not affect the degree to which

respondents had a sense of community.

Figure 8   Whether readers subscribe and Block Community Index

	Subscription		No Subscription	
Low Sense of Community	13	33%	16	57%
High Sense of Community	27	68%	12	43%
Total	40	100%*	28	100%

Chi Square = 4.089, *p* = .043
* Percent does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Those who subscribe to the paper tend to have a higher sense of community in their physical

community, or on their blocks. The mean score on the Block Community Index for a

subscriber was 8.5, compared with a 6.5 for a non-subscriber (*p* = .008).

Based on this evidence, it seems either type of sense of community--Blog or Block--leads

to newspaper use (see Figure 4 on page 32). Since the two indexes (Blog Community and

Block Community) are not correlated, it seems they must have a cumulative effect. In order

to test that theory, a new variable was created to categorize how respondents scored on the

two indexes. A value of 1 was assigned to those respondents who scored high on both

indexes (high-high), and a value of 4 was assigned to those who scored low on both indexes

(low-low). A value of 2 was assigned to those who scored high on the Block Community

Index but low on the Blog Community Index (high-low), and a 3 was assigned to those who

scored high on the Blog Community Index and low on the Block Community Index (low-

high). The highest subscriber rate was found in the group that scored high on both the Blog

Community Index and the Block Community Index. The lowest subscriber rate was found in

the group that scored low on both indexes. Of those who scored high on both indexes, 78%

subscribed to the newspaper, compared with 38% of those who scored low on both (Figure 9).

Figure 9   How readers scored on indexes and whether or not they subscribe

	High-High		Low-High		High-Low		Low-Low	
Subscription	14	78%	10	59%	6	50%	6	38%
No Subscription	4	22%	7	41%	6	50%	10	63%
Total	18	100%	17	100%	12	100%	16	100%*

Chi Square = 5.920, *p* = .116
* Percent does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

When the two middle categories are collapsed, the significance is even greater, indicating that the results are even less likely to be due to chance. (Figure 10).

Figure 10   How readers scored on combined indexes and whether or not they subscribe

	High-High		High on one		Low-Low	
Subscription	14	78%	16	55%	6	38%
No Subscription	4	22%	13	45%	10	63%
Total	18	100%	29	100%	16	100%*

Chi Square = 5.696, *p* = .058
* Percent does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Therefore, creating a blogging community has an additive effect--great news for newspaper marketers.

When the combined indexes are compared with how often respondents read the blogs, part of the additive effect is lost. The highest percentage of daily blog readers was found in the group who scored high on the Blog Community Index and low on the Block Community Index. The next highest percentage was in the group that scored high on both. The lowest percentage was found in the group that scored low on both. Of those who scored high on both indexes, 56% read the blogs daily, compared with 38% of those who scored low on both indexes (Figure 11). The results of this comparison contrasted, however, with the results in Figure 10. All (100%) of those who scored high on the Blog Community Index and low on the Block Community Index read the blogs daily, compared with 41% of those who scored high on the Block Community Index and low on the Blog Community Index. This statistic shows that those who perceive a high sense of community on the blogs will read them often,

even if they do not have a high sense of community in their neighborhoods. In fact, perhaps

their sense of community on the blogs can fill in the gap for those who do not feel connected

to their physical community (see discussion on page 43). It is even more likely that these

results are not due to chance (these result are significant at p = .004).

Figure 11 How readers scored on indexes and whether they read the blogs daily

	High-High		Low-High		High-Low		Low-Low	
Read blogs daily	10	56%	7	41%	12	100%	6	38%
Read blogs less often	8	44%	10	59%	0	0%	10	63%
Total	18	100%	17	100%	12	100%	16	100%*

Chi Square = 13.136, p = .004
*Percent does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Of those who scored high on both indexes, 67% visited the *News & Record* website daily,

compared with 44% of those who scored low on both indexes. Of those who scored high on

the Blog Community Index, but low on the Block Community Index, 92% visited the website

daily (leaning toward significance at p = .071) (Figure 12).

Figure 12   How readers scored on indexes and whether they visit the website daily

	High-High		Low-High		High-Low		Low-Low	
Visit website daily	12	67%	10	59%	11	92%	7	44%
Visit website less often	6	33%	7	41%	1	8%	9	56%
Total	18	100%	17	100%	12	100%	16	100%

Chi Square = 7.038, p = .071

Incidental findings

It seems that whether or not people subscribe to the newspaper might predict how long

they have been reading the blogs. Non-subscribers had been reading the blogs for an average

of 12 months, compared with subscribers who had been reading the blogs for an average of 9

months. (t = -2.480, p =.016). No significant relationship exists, however, between whether

or not people subscribe and how often they read the blogs (t = -1.001, p = .320), nor how

often they visited the website (t = .395, p = .694). There does seem to be a relationship

between subscribers and age, which is intuitive. The mean age for subscribers was 46, and

the mean age for non-subscribers was 41(leaning toward significance at t = 1.528, p = .131).

There was no significant relationship between subscribers and political leanings (p = .828).

Daily blog readers do however tend to be slightly more conservative than non-daily readers. Daily blog reading seems to be a predictor of political orientation. There is no significant relationship between how much money someone makes and how often they read the blogs or visit the website.

Surprisingly, age does not predict how often one reads the blogs ($t = -.1, p = .921$) or visits the website ($t = -.088, p = .930$). There is also no significant relationship between age and whether a respondent scores high or low on the Blog Community Index ($t = -.479, p = .634$).

Methodological results

It seems as though one method of gathering a sample of blog readers was more effective than the other. Three times as many participants responded to the e-mailed invitations than to the open invitation posted to the *News & Record* blogs. This disparity could be explained by the time frame for filling out the surveys. Since the e-mailed invitations were given first priority, those who received passwords had two weeks to fill out the survey, and then those without passwords were given an opportunity. Perhaps some of the respondents from the first group did not fill out the survey before the first deadline, and filled it out when the open invitation came. This explanation could limit the value of comparisons between the groups, if they have no differences between them. Another explanation is that only a certain number of blog readers were going to fill out the survey regardless, and after four weeks the total number was reached. Also, since there were no passwords used for the second time period, there is no assurance that each person filled out only one survey. Since there was no incentive for completion, however, there seems to be no motive for filling out the survey more than once. For the purpose of this analysis, the two groups will be identified by whether or not they used a password to fill out the survey. Those who received a password were those

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who left their e-mail addresses on the blog when making a comment. Those who did not

receive a password were those who elected to fill out the survey after an open invitation. For

the purpose of discussion, it will be assumed that a respondent who used a password was

given one, and one who did not did not receive one.

Results from the two samples (those who used passwords and those who did not) were

compared and produced some interesting comparisons. Though differences between the

password and non-password participants are only significant at $p = .1$ or higher, this data still

serves as a jumping off point for future research. Of those respondents who used a password,

59% reported a high sense of community. Of those who did not use a password, 43%

reported a high sense of community (Figure 13).

Figure 13   Password and Blog Community Index

	Password		No Password	
Low Sense of Community	19	41%	15	65%
High Sense of Community	27	59%	8	35%
Total	46	100%	23	100%

Chi Square = 3.508, $p = .061$

The population that used a password scored slightly higher on the Blog Community Index

than the population that did not (leaning toward significance at $p = .11$). People who left their

e-mail addresses on the blog (those who received passwords) may have scored higher

because they felt more at home on the blog, or they recognized other people who were

commenting on the blog (two of the items in the Blog Community Index). So, they may have

felt more comfortable leaving their e-mail address on the blog, because they reported a

higher sense of community. Personality may also be a factor, and those who tend to feel more

isolated could be less likely to leave an e-mail address and less likely to have a sense of

community. Future research can test for the effect of personality type on likelihood to post an

identifier or e-mail address.

A crosstab showed that of those who used a password, 48% said they read the blogs daily, compared with 68% of those who did not use a password (Figure 14).

Figure 14   Password with frequency of blog reading

	Password		No Password	
Read blogs daily	25	48%	16	67%
Read blogs less often	27	52%	8	33%
Total	52	100%	24	100%

Chi square = 2.284, *p* = .131

It seems the people who did not use passwords may read the blogs more often, though the relationship only leans toward significance (at *p* = .1).

Another crosstab shows that that those without passwords visit the newspaper's website more often as well (significant at *p* = .1) (Figure15).

Figure 15   Password with frequency of visits to website

	Password		No Password	
Visits website daily	29	56%	18	75%
Visits website less often	23	44%	6	25%
Total	52	100%	24	100%

Chi square = 2.574, *p* = .109

These may be the lurkers mentioned earlier, the people who read often, but do not participate in the online conversations. These are exactly the people that the researcher was hoping to access with the open invitation.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings seem to support the thesis that those who have a high sense of community--both on the blogs and in their physical community--read the newspaper--both online and off--more than those who do not. Those who have a high sense of community on the blogs read the blogs more often, visit the website more often, and tend to subscribe to the print newspaper. Correlation, however, does not prove causation, and one cannot assume that a high sense of community causes more frequent reading of the blogs, more frequent visits to the website, or subscription. In fact, most of the blog readers probably subscribed before the blogs were launched (but there was no question addressing this). A majority of the respondents (60%) said they subscribe to the newspaper. Blogs are a means to attract readers online who may not necessarily subscribe to the print product, but if a majority of those reading the blogs subscribe, is it wasted time? That 40% may have been drawn in or retained as readers by the blogs, and that is an additional 40% that might not visit the website were it not for the blogs. But is this portion of the population large enough to make up for losses in print circulation? Even if a large number of readers migrate online, newspaper editors and publishers will need to create a new business model to replace print. Knight foundation president Alberto Ibargüen acknowledged this reality in his speech on Feb. 9, 2006. He said:

> We are wedded to excellence in journalism, though not to newspapers, however important a role they play and will continue to play. The world is agnostic as to platform and we need to reflect that, while transferring the values inherent in verification journalism.

The next generation has grown up reading information off of computer screens. They turn to the computer first to get their information. If newspapers hope to connect with this new audience, they just might need to get to it online first, rather than through free distribution print editions.

In the survey, those who subscribed to the paper scored higher on the Block Community Index. This finding supports Robert Putnam's (2000) theory that newspaper readers are more civically engaged. Those who subscribe to the print edition may share a high sense of community with other readers because, as Anderson (1983) wrote, newspapers create a sense of community through shared information. Visiting the website often could have the same effect. Reading the blogs more frequently may also cause someone to gain a greater sense of community. Answers to certain measures in the Blog Community Index would definitely be affected by frequent reading of the blogs. For instance, those who read the blogs often are likely to agree with the statements, "I can recognize the names of most of the people who comment on the blog" or "It is very important to me to read this particular blog." If they agree with these things does that mean they have a greater sense of community? Or just that they like reading the blog?

People may have other motivations for reading the blogs, besides a sense of community. The second statement on the Blog Community Index ("People on this blog do not share the same values") may be measuring something other than sense of community. Despite other negative statements in the index, this statement might be seen as a virtuous condition for an online community. People may read the blog exactly because different readers have different values. As evidenced by this statement in the Blog Community Index, people may read the blogs to get a myriad of opinions on an issue, and to voice their own. It is this bottom-up

quality--so contrary to traditional mainstream media--that may attract blog readers, rather than a shared sense of community with other blog readers.

While one respondent said she did not think the *News & Record* fostered a sense of a community, she said the blogs gave the public a chance to circumvent the newspaper's gate keeping. In an e-mail to the researcher dated March 9, 2006 she wrote:

> The public is not going to hear it from the N&R unless the N&R thinks you need to hear it - they decide what is important and report it, rather than report and let the public decide. Many of us are sick of it – and are delighted that the blogs now exist so at least we have some kind of forum besides "Letters to the Editor."

Interestingly, daily blog reading may predict a decline in sense of community in a reader's physical community. Those who read the blogs daily tended to score lower on the Block Community Index than those who did not read the blogs as often. This finding could support the thesis that online activity can detract from someone's sense of community in his or her physical community. This conclusion would support the dystopian claims that the Internet is eroding social capital in our communities, but runs contrary to the findings of Quan-Haase et al. (2002) that high use of the Internet supplements face-to-face contact. Another theory is that those who scored high on the Blog Community Index and low on the Block Community Index did so because they were reacting to a low sense of community on their blocks, and turned to an online community.

Effects of Age

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings was that, within this population of blog readers, age does not predict the frequency with which respondents read the blogs or visit the website. If newspapers are launching blogs to attract young readers, they may be disappointed to hear that. But, with a median age of 43, and a mean age of 44, the blog

readers are younger than the average newspaper reader at 55 (according to a Carnegie

Corporation study released this fall). Would 43 qualify as a young reader, though? In *Tuned*

Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News, David T. Mindich classified young

readers as those 40 and younger. ASNE's 2004 New Readers study classified young adults as

18-34. Still, the *News & Record* blogs seem to have attracted an audience a decade younger

than the average newspaper reader--a good start. Long-term, habitual changes in reading

habits might take a while to develop, but as younger readers are aware of the opportunities to

interact online at newspaper websites, newspaper readership (at least online) could increase.

One respondent, a former newspaper publisher, argued that blogs are not the way to go to

attract young readers. In fact, he expressed great disdain for blogging in general. In an e-mail

to the researcher on Feb. 28, he wrote:

> I tried to do the survey but found that I could not answer these
> questions. Blogs are not news. They are mostly people spouting off with little
> information, or facts. These people should probably be seeing a
> therapist. Television and blogs are about the ruin the concept of news with
> authority. and integrity. The *News & Record* is a good case in point. They have
> not had a really good news story about issues that truly affect lives in years. For
> example, the crisis in medical care. The minimum wage, the major transportation
> and energy problem. On and on. They have no clear vision or news goals. So
> they now think a few blogs will do the job. Where I live there are only 20% of
> the people who have computers and can access the Internet. That is in
> Rockingham County. Go figure. When news organizations become vigorous and
> vital once more, the papers will be read and circulation will rise and young
> people will turn to them.

The respondent raises an interesting point about Internet access. While this survey focuses

on a population that has access to the Internet, what about those who do not? Many authors

(Chaudhuri, et al.) have expressed concern about the "digital divide." If newspapers move

online, how will people without Internet access (often low-income, unemployed and

uneducated) stay informed? The findings from this study show that, within the surveyed

population, income and education had no influence on how often respondents read the blogs. Here it does not seem there is as much as a divide, but that may be because the median income in the sample was $40,000 a year. This number does reflect the median income for the City of Greensboro (according to the U.S. Census Bureau). Plus, Greensboro is home to four colleges, and there may be many places where people--students or otherwise--can get access to the Internet.

Limitations and Future Research

One obvious limitation of this study is the small sample size. Another is the manner in which the sample was generated. Because of these two limitations, this study produced exploratory research, rather than confirmatory research. Confirmatory research could possibly prove causation, where this study can only show correlations. This study provided a basis, however, for future research on the topic of newspaper blogs. If someone were to replicate this study, one way to increase the sample size would be to include blog readers at several different papers. If the study was expanded to include people who read blogs at 20 newspapers, the number of respondents could increase, and if blogs at websites of newspapers with larger circulation numbers were included, the number could increase a great deal. In addition, researchers could create a probability sample by having a comprehensive list of all those reading the blogs, and choosing every nth person. This method would be possible on a site that requires registration to read the blogs. An even better approach would be to sample the general population to identify users and non-users of blogs for a broader comparison.

Another limitation may have been the survey itself. The survey instrument may have introduced errors, because of the way in which people interpreted the questions. One

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respondent highlighted a problem with the survey question about how often he reads the

blogs, and how often he visits the website. In an e-mail dated Feb. 28, he wrote:

> You might want to clarify your questions about how often a blog is read and
> how often the newspaper's Web site is visited. I read the blog every day, but I use
> an RSS reader, so I don't actually visit the Web site every day. Maybe this won't
> pose a problem in your data, but I wanted to at least point it out.

If someone receives the most recent posts to a blog via an RSS feed, does this constitute a

visit to the blog or the website? Additional questions on how one viewed blog content could

clarify this question.

The number of newspaper blogs has exploded, and it seems like every day different

newspapers are adding blogs to their websites. This paper attempted to answer the question

"is it worth it?" Further research may be able to answer that question definitively.

Conclusion

As stated above, it is difficult to make a claim that a sense of community on the blogs has

caused an increase in blog reading. It seems like visits to the website have picked up since

the blogs began, but it is difficult to tell why. It could be due to three things: (1) a sense of

community from reading the blogs, (2) the fact that the website now offers the blog feature,

or (3) an increase in societal use of the Internet. Based on this exploratory research, it seems

that a high sense of community on the blogs could lead to an increase in time spent reading

the blogs. If this were the case, then newspaper editors could attempt to get more hits on their

blogs, and perhaps their websites, by building a cohesive online community. In the print

newspaper advertising model, the number of eyeballs that are drawn to the page translates

into how much they can charge advertisers for that space. While generating more hits to the

website may result in profits, it can also serve the newspaper's democratic aim – to inform

the public. The results of this study suggest that the more often people read the blogs, the

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more likely they will be to report a sense of community on the blogs. Also, the greater sense of community they have, the more they will read the blogs. This virtuous cycle would mean that newspaper blogs can help keep readers engaged and informed. Based on this study, one cannot claim that a sense of community causes people to read the blogs more often, or the other way around. A panel study would help to establish the direction of causation.

The results of this study suggest that a strong sense of community may influence people to visit more often, or vice versa, but only half of the respondents reported a strong sense of community online. One suggestion would be to increase the sense of community online and see if daily page views increase. The question is "how does one do that?" The people at the *News & Record* have taken the first step by asking readers what they want and involving them in this ongoing experiment. Agency and ownership can contribute to a sense of community, and these elements have been implemented from the start. The staff has given even more autonomy to their readers by designating "Hometown Hubs," on which residents write hyper-local stories about what is going on in their neighborhoods. The *News & Record* staff must continue in these endeavors and listen to readers' suggestions.

In her analysis of the Julie/Julia Project, Blanchard found evidence that only a moderate sense of community existed among those who read the blog. In responses to open-ended questions, some users said they felt they were there only as observers because Julie rarely responded to comments. When she did, they said it was only to communicate with her friends in the "real world." In reading the *News & Record* blogs, it seems this could be the case. People may be deterred by the fact that there is a very active contingent of people who address each other by name and debate issues heatedly. While these people in the "inner circle" may feel a high level of community, those on the outskirts may be discouraged from

participating. One way to remedy this would be having an active moderator consciously try to respond to a variety of people who have commented on the blogs.

The creators of the Sense of Community Index, McMillan and Chavis, wrote that there are four elements of community: feelings of membership, feelings of influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. A combination of these elements leads to a strong sense of community, but it does not guarantee it. On The Chalkboard, a *News & Record* blog on local school boards, three of the four elements are present. People certainly share an emotional connection when it comes to the education of their children. The discussions on this blog are some of the richest and result in a large number of comments. Interestingly, many people who comment on this blog use pseudonyms, and these people tend to be the most aggressive in their comments. It seems that allowing people to enter fake names causes them to take more liberty in their statements because they are less likely to be held personally accountable. While this could pose a danger, people wrote that they felt safer, because they did not want other people to be able to identify them. In a conversation on the blog, some people wrote that they worked for the school district and feared retribution, and many had children in school, and wrote that they did not want their children to be unfairly effected by their comments. Others wrote that they proudly used their names because they stood behind what they wrote, insinuating that those who used pseudonyms were less credible, less firm in their beliefs, or ashamed to reveal themselves. Either way, it seems providing the option to be anonymous resulted in more overall interaction. That is one benefit of both anonymous speech and blogs. Anonymous speech can, however, detract from the writer's credibility, and therefore interfere with the creation of community. Most definitions of community require identification. As stated earlier, the definition used in this

thesis is centered on relationships between people. If certain members of a geographic

community wore masks or wouldn't reveal their identities, that would certainly hinder the

sense of community in that neighborhood. As one can see by reading The Chalkboard, some

commenters become abusive, possibly because they do not feel accountable for what they

write as an unidentified blog reader. Results from the survey also suggest that those who

identified themselves on the blogs (those who used a password to fill out the survey) had a

higher sense of community on the blogs than those who did not. Also, the number of

identified blog readers who filled out the survey was triple that of the unidentified blog

readers who filled out the survey. This result may indicate an aptitude for interaction that

could feed into the virtuous cycle mentioned earlier. (It may also recommend the use of one

method of gathering a sample of blog readers for a survey.) In the case of The Chalkboard,

more moderator interaction may help keep the conversation civil, but it may cut down on the

number of comments.

More moderator interaction seems to help the discussions in John Robinson's "Editor's

Log." Like the host of a good dinner party, he is always ready to facilitate conversation and

to calm people when feathers get ruffled. He asks additional questions rather than giving

absolute answers, and he compliments people on their insightful comments. By keeping the

conversation going and by continuing to participate in the conversation, Robinson signals his

respect for his readers and admits that he does not have all the answers. His personality

contributes greatly to the success of the *News & Record* blogs.

All of this attentiveness takes time though, and newspaper editors will need to decide at

what cost. They also need to decide what they have to gain. If they wish to attract more

young readers, blogging may or may not work. If they wish to gain additional readers of all

ages, this may help. Though respondents' memories may not always be correct, they reported

reading the website more frequently after the blogs were launched. If this is the case, then

newspapers may benefit from starting blogs. There is no clear business model for making

money off of the blogs, but there is no major cost to starting them either. The largest cost is

time.

At least one person who was invited to complete this survey placed a lot of faith in the

potential of newspaper blogs. On February 28, 2006, Dr. Douglas Schell, a professor of

business at UNC-Pembroke, who authorized the use of his name in this report wrote:

> I do think that BLOGS, once some set of "industry" standards are created, will
> either replace hard copy newspapers or cause these newspapers to stop being so
> "establishment" oriented. IMO [in my opinion], the *News & Record* and other
> hard copy news media are in DEEP trouble. IF they don't become more customer
> conscious … report on the REAL news instead of so much FLUFF.

While no business model exists for blogs today, newspapers might someday find a way to

make money from their online content. If that occurs, newspaper editors need to make their

websites a daily destination for their readers if they hope to capitalize on them. In the middle

of the 20th century, people checked their front steps for the newspaper each morning and

afternoon. If blogs can become that indispensable, maybe in the 21st century readers will

begin to check newspaper websites every morning and afternoon, and newspapers will create

new reading habits for a new generation of readers.

APPENDIX:

Survey

Here are some statements about the *News & Record* blog you read most often. For each one, please tell me whether you:
   1. Strongly disagree   2. Disagree   3. Neutral   4. Agree   5. Strongly agree

I. 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 the 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 read it can 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.

13. How long have you read this blog?
Less than a month
Between a month and six months
Six months to a year
More than a year
14. How often do you visit the blog?
Once a month
Several times a month
Once a day
More than once a day
15. How often do you visit the *News & Record* website? (same options as above)
16. How often did you visit the website before the newspaper started blogging? (same)
17. How do you use the *News & Record*?
Subscribe 7 days
Subscribe on weekends
Read it regularly but don't subscribe
Read it occasionally but don't subscribe
Rarely or never read it
18. Which *News & Record* blog do you read most often? _____

Now here are some questions about the block on which you live.

1. What is your zip code? _____
2. How many years have you lived on your block?

Now here are some statements about the block on which you live. For each one, please tell me whether you:
   2. Strongly disagree   2. Disagree   3. Neutral   4. Agree   5. Strongly agree

I. 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.

Finally, here are a few questions so we can describe the people who took part in our study.

Demographic information:

1. Are you: Male or Female? ___

2. What is your age? ____

3. Are you now employed full-time, part-time, are you retired or are you not employed for pay?
   Employed full-time
   Employed part-time
   Retired
   Not employed
   Disabled
   Student
   Other

4. Are you registered to vote in your election district? Yes or No

5. In general, how would you describe your political views?
   Very conservative
   Conservative
   Moderate

Liberal
Very Liberal

6. What is the last grade or class you completed in school?
   None, or grade 1 to 8
   High school incomplete (Grade 9-11)
   High school graduate, Grade 12 or GED certificate
   Business, technical, or vocational school after high school
   Some college or university work, but no four-year degree
   College or university graduate
   Post graduate or professional schooling after college

7. Last year, approximately what was your total income before taxes?
   Less than $10,000
   $10,000 to less than $20,000
   $20,000 to less than $30,000
   $30,000 to less than $40,000
   $40,000 to less than $60,000
   $60,000 to less than $100,000
   $100,000 or more

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