Media Studies Department

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**Community Journalism** \*

In 2003, The *Fairfield Tribune* was a 130-year-old daily newspaper in a Midwestern city with a population of 64,000. The *Tribune’s*circulation had declined slightly over the last ten years, but it still maintained a circulation of 52,000 and reached about 50% of the homes in the city of Fairfield and in surrounding Fairfield County.

The *Tribune*was well respected in the local community, in the state, and among journalists.  It served its community well, reported the news of important local issues, and won numerous state and national journalism awards. David and Susan Jones owned the *Tribune*, took an active role in the paper, and were deeply involved in the community by being on the boards of many charitable and educational organizations, including the local university.

The Joneses, who were in their 60s, had hoped to retire in 2004 and turn the paper over to their son. They had made a good living over the years and had substantial investments in local real estate, but in 2003 the *Tribune*returned a skimpy profit.  This situation concerned them because they knew that they could sell their paper for a lot more if it were profitable.  The Joneses kept expenses down and ran a relatively tight ship, but they always refused to cut their editorial staff too much because they did not want to hurt their service to the community.

Community service had been their goal and their mantra since they bought the paper in 1975. Over the years, they had printed a series of stories and editorialized on local political corruption, on police brutality, on healthcare, and on environmental issues. In 1980 they exposed the environmental and safety hazards of a local coal strip-mining company, the largest local employer. The coal company retaliated and played rough. The strip-mining company was the paper’s second largest advertiser and it cancelled its advertising and pressured many local businesses to do the same.  At the time of the paper’s crusade, the *Tribune’s* offices were fire-bombed and it burned to the ground.

Two local college students were eventually convicted of the fire-bombing along with the city’s Sheriff, who gave the students a huge wad of bills, according the state attorney who prosecuted the case.  Nothing was ever proven, but it was widely suspected that the coal company had financed the operation. The paper was rebuilt with insurance money, but it struggled for several years to return to minimal profitability.

The Jones’s son, Don, had gone to journalism school, graduated, and returned to Fairfield to work on the paper.  In 2003 he served as the paper’s editor. On most issues, Don agreed with his father, who still wrote the *Tribune’s*editorials. However, there was one issue on which father and son disagreed – community journalism.

Community Journalism was a movement that experts generally agreed had begun at the *Wichita Eagle.*The movement had spread to many newspapers during the 1990s, and the Joneses had adopted the practice for the *Fairfield Tribune.* Community Journalism is based on the principle of providing the community with news about issues that the community selects, advocates for community improvements, and generally supports the community. As did other papers who adopted community journalism, the *Tribune*had a panel of advisors made up of community leaders and ordinary citizens who advised the paper on which issues were important, and the paper addressed these issues.  The *Tribune*also ran editorials praising Fairfield as a wonderful place to live and do business in.

David and Susan Jones thought that their approach was good journalism that fulfilled the newspaper’s mission. Their son, Don, took a journalistically purist approach and felt community journalism was subjective boosterism.  Don claimed it was not objective, and by letting the community decide on what was news, that the paper was turning its editorial decision making over to non-journalists and relinquishing sound news judgment.  He said, “You’re handing over your blue editing pencil to a committee and abrogating your journalistic responsibility. Don also felt that boosting the community was advocacy journalism, not the objective, balanced, neutral journalism he had learned to practice in journalism school.

The issue came to a head when the *Tribune’s*advisory board told the paper that the most important current issue was the potential danger from a nearby nuclear reactor owned by the local power company. David Jones was preparing an editorial and assigning a reporting team to investigate the nuclear power plant. Don Jones confronted his father and said, “Dad, there is a war in Iraq, a state budget crisis that is causing the state legislature to threaten funding cuts for the state university of $300 million, and Fairfield has a corrupt Sheriff and a judge on the take.  The reactor is not the most important story!”

The father replied, “We are a community journalism paper and we respond to the community’s needs.  We always have and we always will.”

Don responded, “The power company is our third largest advertiser. They will pull their advertising and pressure a lot of business to do the same. In this slow economy, the paper will lose money and your and Mom’s retirement plans will be ruined. Don’t jeopardize your future for a story that is not that important.”

ASSIGNMENT

1. Craft an argument in favor of the *Tribune*running the editorial and investigative series exposing the potential health hazard of the nuclear reactor. Make sure your arguments include the use of a set of Values, Principles, and Loyalties.
2. Craft an argument against the *Tribune*running the editorial and investigative series exposing the potential health hazard of the nuclear reactor. Make sure your arguments include the use of a set of Values, Principles, and Loyalties.
3. Craft an argument in favor of doing community journalism. Make sure your arguments include the use of a set of Values, Principles, and Loyalties.
4. Craft an argument against doing community journalism. Make sure your arguments include the use of a set of Values, Principles, and Loyalties.

\* This case was prepared by Charles Warner.