

Adapting Small Market Rural Media to the Challenges of New Media: Interviews with Small Market Rural Managers

[CINDY J. PRICE](#)
University of Wyoming

[MICHAEL R. BROWN](#)
University of Wyoming

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Abstract

Small rural media outlets are key sources of information, provide a site for local advertising, and are an important local voice in their communities. This paper examines how small market rural media are trying to survive under tough economic conditions, and how they are using new media as part of their strategy to remain viable. Interviews were conducted with managers at several small market newspapers, television, and radio groups in order to identify specific concerns and strategies about how they are managing their resources, how they are using new media, and how they envision their future. The results show that most media are struggling, but also find that local media are in a good position to make their new media content viable for their local audiences.

Cuts in journalistic enterprises dominate news stories about today's media. *Columbia Journalism Review* called this "a transformational moment" in the history of journalism as the traditional economic foundation of advertising is eroding at rapid rate (Downie and Schudson 2009¹). Driving this change is the move to online content by readers and listeners, especially younger people. Media managers are trying to monetize the Internet by increasing the number of ads (Downie and Schudson 2009²) and experimenting with economic models that charge for online content.³

Most research about the economy and the effect of new media on business has focused on big companies. Smith and Wiltse (2005⁴) suggested that researchers need to study media in more rural areas. Downie and Schudson (2009⁵) said smaller media organizations that do not have competition have been relatively successful. Morton (2009⁶) said 70% of smaller daily newspapers are still profitable. More community-oriented, non-daily newspapers are also doing well, as a whole.⁷ This is in part because these smaller, often rural, media organizations take their civic responsibilities seriously (Bradshaw, Foust, and Bernt 2005⁸).

There are two major reasons why media organizations are so vital in rural areas. First, the First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press so people can be informed about their government,

and these media are the key sources that link government issues to local audiences. They are key sources of information. Second, media outlets provide key sites where businesses can reach their local audiences. If newspapers or radio stations leave the area, it is unlikely that other entities will step in to fill the void. This study examines what small market rural media are doing to incorporate social media and remain relevant to their communities. It concludes with policy implications for state and local governments to help keep rural media organizations vibrant.

Media management and media economics theory

As stated earlier, media organizations are experiencing many transitions. According to a national survey, 31% of Americans get their news and information from television (down from 35%); 19% from a daily newspaper (down from 24%); 19% from radio (up from 17%); and 15% from the Internet (up from 13%). Those who are younger and college-educated were more likely than average to get their information from the Internet (Rumpza and Bellmont 2009⁹). Vocus Media Research Group found that in 2009 nearly 300 newspapers closed – 230 of which were weeklies. Many TV station groups went bankrupt, so big-name anchors were cut to lower costs. More than 10,000 jobs were cut in radio (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010¹⁰).

In the last 100 years, when new media came into the picture, the old media adjusted but generally was not totally replaced (Hachten 2005¹¹), a concept called substitutability. In other words, media outlets all provide information or entertainment, but these outlets are not fully interchangeable (Picard 1989¹²). But now, the Internet has become “an integral part of everyday life” putting new pressure on old media (Kung, Picard, and Towse 2008¹³). Although Hachten (2005¹⁴) said that the Internet is a complementary source of information for media outlets, other sources say that it and other new technology *can* replace the older media in many ways (Bakker and Sadaba 2008¹⁵). For example, you can download television shows, listen to streaming of radio, and read newspaper articles. With the Kindle and iPad devices, you can read books or magazines (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010¹⁶).

The field of media economics is related to “how media operators meet the informational and entertainment needs of audiences, advertisers, and society with available resources” (Picard 1989¹⁷). Media organizations are concerned with owners, audiences, advertisers, and employees. Owners want return on their investments. Audience members want quality content at little or no cost and the ability to easily acquire the content. Advertisers want to tell their stories to their target audiences at a reasonable cost. Employees want fair pay, good working conditions, and “psychic rewards for their labor” (Picard 1989¹⁸). Managers must allocate resources to get the maximum benefit for all groups, but need to insure their businesses are profitable.

Media managers also have to determine what value their medium has to advertisers and consumers. In media, an audience member can have a direct investment of money, such as buying a book, magazine, or newspaper (Picard 1989¹⁹). However, with more free content coming through the Internet, there is less “investment” from audience members. People often want the content for free, but also do not want to be bothered by advertising (Bakker and Sadaba 2008²⁰), so media managers are reconsidering the value of their organizations in light of changing consumer preferences. A problem that traditional media organizations have is inertia. For example, newspapers have been operating in a similar manner for years and are not easily

equipped to adapt (Kung, Picard, and Towse 2008²¹). Despite the tendency of inertia, media managers need to consider how new technology could be a benefit, such as having an online-only publication, which eliminates printing and paper costs.

One of the ways that media organizations are trying to make money is to have a paywall for online content (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010²²; Hachten 2005²³). However, there is no consensus about how it will work because people are used to getting information for free (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010²⁴). But Washkuch (2009²⁵) said the large numbers may not be absolutely necessary because those who pay for the content will be a more engaged and interested group. The bottom line is that media managers are still scrambling to find the business model that is going to keep quality content while still making a profit (Hachten 2005²⁶).

New media and technology's effect on media organizations

User-generated content has exploded in the last few years. Sites like YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and many others, allow people to become creators of content and bypass traditional channels. Nielsen Research Company found that in December 2009 users around the globe spent about five and a half hours on social media sites, an 82% increase over 2008. Facebook had 207 million visitors to lead the pack, but Twitter saw an increase of 581%, up to 18.1 million users ("Led by Facebook" 2010²⁷). Media organizations are tuning into the user-generated angle. Many other news organizations around the United States use pictures or video from viewers as part of their newspapers, newscasts, or websites. For example, an airplane crash near Boulder, CO, was captured by a by-stander and the footage was used by both local ("Boulder air collision" 2010²⁸) and national stations (Smith 2010²⁹).

Unlike a traditional audience that passively waits for information or entertainment, "Internet users are in many cases active, looking for those pieces of content to satisfy their particular and concrete needs" (Bakker and Sadaba 2008³⁰). People can also use the Internet to be more interactive with organizations or groups they visit by posting comments, links, or pictures (Kung, Picard, and Towse 2008³¹). Some media organizations are using social media to encourage this interaction. "In some cases, a little-known newspaper or radio station may not even have an official Web site but will have a Facebook page or a reporter who can be followed on Twitter" (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010³²).

Each of the major traditional media have been going through transitions related to new media technology. David Coates, managing editor of newspaper content at Vocus Media Research Group, said newspaper editors ten years ago did not see the Internet as a real threat. "In their minds, nothing could replace the feeling of having an actual newspaper in your hands, and as a result the newspaper business was late to the party when it came to taking advantage of the Internet for news distribution" (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010³³).

At first, the Internet era was thought to threaten newspapers and newspaper business models "to the core" (Ala-Fossi 2008³⁴). In some ways this is true, especially as younger readers turn to other sources for information. And these sources are not necessarily the traditional "gatekeepers," i.e., the journalism outlets where traditional reporting takes place. To counteract

this, many publishers have online editions, but those editions do not have the advertising revenue to sustain the costs needed to create and put the information on the Web. But digital publishing can cut down on print costs and increase the distribution channels to reach more people (Ala-Fossi 2008³⁵).

Television is also adjusting to new technology. The most immediate effect of the Internet is “the potential displacement effect on television advertising revenues” (Ala-Fossi 2008³⁶). Viewership for most networks has gone down, partly because of the number of channels, but also because people can download and watch content on their own time (Ala-Fossi 2008³⁷). “In record number, stations are trying to make some of their reporters’ one-man bands so they will not have to pay for a photographer,” according to Julie Holley, magazine editor of television content for Vocus Media Research Group (Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010³⁸).

According to research by Ala-Fossi, et al., (2008³⁹) and Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera (2010⁴⁰), radio has been most affected by the recession and the Internet. People can hear live streaming of radio stations over the Internet. They also can download songs, bypassing the radio station altogether and listening to their music on their own timetable. This includes satellite radio, iPods/mp3 players, streamed audio, CD players and other audio. The costs associated with having a radio station on the Internet are lower, but at this point, there is little evidence to show that Internet radio has enough advertising to sustain itself (Ala-Fossi, et al., 2008⁴¹; Coates, Bredholt, Holley, Johnson, and Mendolera 2010⁴²). But radio has historically adapted and become more local. Stiernstedt (2008⁴³) said there is a need for radio stations to be more active in both creating their audiences through the use of new media, and using more digital and interactive ways of understanding who their audiences are.

Rural communities and the importance of localism for media organizations

Even though the overall United States population is becoming more urbanized, in much of the Great Plains, rural areas still dominate. The range of rural counties increases 70% in Iowa and Missouri to around 90% in Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Currently, distribution of governmental support goes primarily to agricultural entities, when agriculture is becoming less important in most areas. Only South Dakota and Nebraska have 68% of their counties farm-dependent, where Missouri (5%) and Minnesota (11%) have the least farm-dependent counties (Mannion and Zougris 2009⁴⁴). Luther (2007⁴⁵) said that there is a need for financial commitment from communities in rural areas to help sustain themselves rather than rely on outside contributions that are not sustainable.

In rural areas, media organizations are strongly tied to the local area and its financial health. Local media in rural settings have always faced difficulties and perceived weaknesses. When compared with large market or national media, localized rural media generally have fewer resources, lower pay, staff members with limited experience, and smaller audiences (Armstrong, Wood, and Nelson 2006⁴⁶). However, most local practitioners understand the importance of their role as media producers, and take their local civic responsibilities seriously (Bradshaw, Foust, and Bernt 2005⁴⁷). For many scholars, the local character of such media is a particular strength. In the case of radio, historically localism has been vitally important, not only because of well-

defined geographically local audiences, but because radio can create local content from local sources, and it is an easy technology for audiences to consume (Hilliard and Keith 2005⁴⁸).

However, radio lost much of its local character as corporate ownership “outsourced” programming in order to improve efficiencies and profit (Hood 2007⁴⁹). While audiences can still have a strong local character, the local content generated by radio has declined. As a result, radio has lost a significant audience to alternative platforms, including portable music players, satellite radio, and the Internet. The decline of broadcast radio listeners has led to popular speculation about the “end of radio” (“The end of radio” 2005⁵⁰). However, some scholars suggest that a return to localism will make radio a vital community resource once again (Hilliard and Keith 2005⁵¹). Recent research has shown that radio has a valued local presence. In cases of local emergencies, radio performs a vital service because it is both local and immediate, but only if local radio has a commitment to such activities and views itself as a local resource (Spence, Lachlan, McIntyre, and Seeger 2009⁵²). Torosyan and Munro (2010⁵³) found that local audiences valued local radio. They appreciated the speed and reliability of emergent information, wanted to be involved and appreciated by the staff, wanted local content, and wanted friendly accessible staff. The research concluded that audiences have a clear understanding about what is local, and that an audience for local radio exists.

Another challenge facing local media is the availability of new platforms that both compete with and compliment their efforts. Alternative and “new media” platforms provide more choices for audiences, and typically isolated rural/local audiences share in these choices. However, the financial and human resources for local media to compete with new media have largely remained the same. Profitable uses of new media have not been proven, making it difficult for local media to take full advantage of new media opportunities. At the same time, converging media and its use suggests that various local media need to use a variety of platforms.

Research Questions

RQ1: Are rural media managing their resources differently than before?

RQ2: Are rural media transitioning to online media content?

RQ3: What do rural media managers see for their organizations in the future?

Methodology

In order to ascertain how smaller media organizations are performing in today’s economy and political realities, the authors interviewed top media managers at three newspapers, three radio groups, and a television station in the Great Plains region of the United States⁵⁴. Because this is a pilot study, specific managers were selected to represent different types of rural, small market administrators. For example, there is an independent newspaper owner, a small newspaper group manager, and a regional manager of a larger newspaper group that only has weeklies and bi-weeklies. Radio managers were from clusters of stations serving markets of 5,000 to 30,000 people. The television station owner had only four stations in his group, all of which were smaller markets. A few in-depth interviews were conducted because of the exploratory nature of

the research. This is a common method for studying new topics and gathering data needed to look for patterns (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006⁵⁵).

To answer the primary research questions, the authors created an interview guide of questions based on the literature review and the research questions:

RQ1: Are small market media managing their resources differently than before?

- In general, what would you say the current state of your organization is?
- How do you define your local audiences?
- How much local content is being produced?
- What is the morale of the people who work for your company?
- Have you changed your management style in lieu of the economic condition?

RQ2: Are small market media transitioning to online media content?

- What do you currently do in terms of new technology and new media? Why?
- Do any members of your staff interact with local audiences either through personal appearances or online?
- Have you considered charging for online content?

RQ3: What do small market media see for their organizations in the future?

- What do you think your organization will look like in five years?

The interviews were conducted in person and by telephone using the above list of questions. The authors also used follow-up questions during the course of the interviews in order to clarify and explore interviewee responses.

The results were analyzed using a qualitative approach. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Once in document form the responses were categorized under the appropriate research question. Finally the responses were examined for common themes, key concepts, and the unique characteristics. The coding procedure was open ended and done by identifying key words and phrases. This approach allows the researchers to identify themes common to these media as well as individual characteristics (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006⁵⁶).

Results

RQ 1: Are rural media using their resources differently than before?

All of the interviewees stated their businesses were doing fine, but admitted that 2009 was a tough year. One respondent said, "Last year's economy was the worst I've ever been in, and I've been in radio for 40+ years." The respondents indicated that only a few employees were laid off, but there were other effects on personnel. There were few, if any, raises in salaries. Sales personnel were affected by dropped accounts. Even traditionally strong accounts were affected, as one respondent said, "the choice accounts don't have money." There were indicators that morale was somewhat lowered because of the economy, but the downturn impacted entire stations and newspaper groups and lowered morale was placed in a larger economic context.

The downturn in the economy has led to tight budgets, budget cuts, and a cautiously conservative approach to managing money. In spite of this, the respondent from the largest radio market indicated his group expected some aggressive growth. Another manager said he has taken a strong leadership role and talks directly to the advertisers. "My theory is you're not going to get out of it if you don't let people know what you have. The best way to put yourself out of business is to cut your advertising budget because if we don't tell them what you have, they're not going to come in." He said they have actually increased what the station is doing in the current economy. The smaller groups that served the smallest communities were the most cautious about their budgets. One respondent said, "(T)he belt is so tight it hurts." Two respondents mentioned that stations with the most economic risk were single mom-and-pop stations in markets less than 5,000 listeners. The respondents for this study managed clusters of three or more stations and indicated that multiple stations within a community provides some economic cushion.

All of the stations used some form of satellite programming. Respondents viewed satellite feed as an economic necessity. One respondent remarked, "If I had to have live announcers on each of the stations that would pretty much eat up the cash flow." Satellite services were used to provide either music or specialized national programming in sports and/or talk. In some cases, the expense of national programming was not worth giving up local advertising for the national ads inserted into these programs. As one respondent noted, "For our audience, it's 200 miles to the nearest Red Lobster."

In the newspaper interviews, the single-owner newspaper only had two part-time employees, so he said he didn't need to change anything. One of the group paper managers said there have been some changes in management style. "I think that we became a little more inclusive in terms of including people in some of the brainstorming and bring us your ideas from everyone on the staff in terms of what can we do to get more subscribers, what can we do to get more ad revenue, what can we do internally to watch our expenses because we went through that for awhile too." He said they have also done more training with all of their employees to come up with new promotional ideas. Another group manager said his only change was to pay more attention to people to give them encouragement and accolades in lieu of increased pay.

Localism is important for all of the respondents. One of the respondents referenced a recent *Radio Inc.* article that stated localism was the most important commodity that radio has to sell. Local branding is important in order to appeal to local advertisers who provide the economic support for all of the media organizations. The radio station media managers said they offer quite a diversity of locally produced content, all of it strongly connected to the communities within

which they belong. Programs offered included those you would expect, such as news, sports, local talk, and public affairs. The smaller markets had a stronger information base within their local communities. Because local newspapers only came out a few days per week, these stations could fill a local need that larger markets with daily newspapers didn't need.

At the single owner newspaper, 100% of content was locally produced, either by the owner, staff members, or people in town, such as the wrestling coach. In the group newspapers, the managers estimate the locally produced content of between 85 and 90%. The TV owner said about 15 to 20 hours per week was locally product, most of which was the newscasts. All of the managers defined their local audiences by geography, the local area of their county or where the airwaves could reach.

When asked how the media organizations interact with their local communities, all the people interviewed expressed a strong commitment to their communities. All of the radio respondents said that remote broadcasts were particularly important ways to connect to communities. Local fairs, fundraisers, and other important public community events served as opportunities to do remotes. These were viewed as important community service activities, as a "donation to the community." Remotes can serve to "localize" satellite feeds when timed to the breaks scheduled in the programming and are an important source of visibility and direct interaction with communities.

Almost all of the media organizations said that local involvement went beyond a simple business arrangement, but meant connection to the community through civic organizations and other means of belonging to the community. All of the newspapers said that the local news is what set them apart from their competitors and what keeps their readers. However, the localism is also part of what attracts advertisers. One group manager said, "A lot of times we become kind of consultants to them, our advertising sales reps become consultants to them because we talk to them on a regular basis and give them ideas on other ways to help market their business as well as our newspapers." A radio manager agreed with the advertiser angle. "We really let our advertisers set what we put on there too. I took over a station that was really heavily a rap station and it played a lot of music that was offensive to people. . . . We went away from that to more of a hit music station. If it's a hit, we play it and that's what people like."

RQ2: Are rural media transitioning to new media?

Most rural media are slow to transition to new media. Almost all of the organizations had Web sites. None of the organizations were using Twitter, although one had tried and stopped the feed. One radio group had a Facebook presence as did many newspapers. One newspaper group manager said the benefit is hard to measure. "We can't really know definitely where things are coming from, if readers are seeing us on their Facebook page and then picking up the paper because of it, but it's something I feel like we need to do." The television owner said his stations were slower to have an online presence because he did see the monetary reasons. "We've been very reluctant to do that because we felt like it was spending dollars to chase pennies. If you're an entrepreneur, you have to focus on the business first. If it doesn't generate revenue, you've got to figure out why you're doing this."

At one newspaper group, the manager said, “(O)ur Web sites are set up so anytime we update the Web site, it automatically updates our Facebook that we have associated with it. So we do have that cross-platform there.” One newspaper even had a podcast on its website. “We do a daily newscast that we put on every morning with our news staff. It’s a two- or three-minute clip about what happened overnight, what’s happening later that day and a few highlights of weather. For weekly papers, it’s a way for us to stay on top of our market on a daily basis.”

The television owner recently hired a director of online and Internet-based communications. One of the interviewees is the manager of all the web information for his newspaper company nationwide. He said Web presence is vital. “We alluded a little bit to the younger generation and their apparent lack of desire to pick up a printed product. We need to keep our name out there of the newspaper in front of the younger generation, we have to find ways to attract them and one of the main ways that we’ve seen is through the web offerings.” Even the radio manager felt a web presence was important. “I think it’s extremely important. Every office has a computer, not every office has a radio. We can always stream on that.” But for smaller markets, the cost of streaming was prohibitive. The Web sites of the smaller groups featured more local content that was linked closely to their local over-the-air content. These Web sites extended localism onto the Internet.

All of the radio respondents mentioned satellite radio as potential competition but dismissed it. One said, “It won’t hurt us as all,” and another said, “In all honesty, it doesn’t affect me.” Because satellite radio is a pay service and radio is free, it is a service that is likely dropped in tough economic times. The common reason for dismissing satellite radio as competition was that it is highly “niched” with no localism. It does not compete for advertising revenue, and therefore does not present serious competition for local radio’s revenue. “The cost of radio has always been passed on to advertisers. By them letting us get their word out, they pay us to help them get their word out, that is what keeps our doors open. So as long as there’s businesses that need to say something over the air, it will always be there for free,” one manager said.

The respondent for the largest radio cluster expressed a somewhat adversarial position for much of the new media, including airing liners such as “Reason #1152 why you should listen to us instead of your iPod. We don’t charge a buck a song.” The largest group was also the slowest to implement its Web site. Although a site had previously existed it was underdeveloped. A new Web site was waiting for proper branding before being launched, but there is a sense that, “It’s kind of like, though, that we want them to step back from technology to get back to the radio.” However, this respondent also mentioned that the new cellular phones have FM modulators so people can listen live.

One of the respondents was not part of the new media landscape. The single owner’s market is a very small rural town, but many of his subscribers are from other places. However, he has no website. “I think the bigger papers are making a mistake giving away their content for free. If I had a website with news from the paper on it, people would not buy the paper,” he said.

It was clear that new media is not the primary focus or concern of these groups. The Web sites are mostly viewed as necessary even though there is still some uncertainty about their role, purpose, and success. Professional Web designers were used to establish Web pages, but

maintenance for several sites was done in-house on a part time basis, and content was produced by those who were already producing on-air content. In some cases, no personnel were assigned solely to the Web, although sometimes it was a “young person” who was recruited to monitor Web activities. But one newspaper group did have a Web manager and a system for all of their papers to do quick updates.

RQ 3: What do rural media see for their organizations in the future?

Although the economy has been poor, the respondents were confident their futures were solid. The interviewees from the bigger areas expected growth, including expansion into other markets. The smaller areas expressed a more conservative assessment, but were confident that their commitment to serve their communities put them on solid ground for modest growth within their communities.

No matter what they are facing, the rural media managers still have a positive outlook. One radio manager said, “As media come and go, we’re always going to be there. It’s a long-term, long-standing thing. When a tornado hits this town like it did before and everything is dead, you can turn on your car and the radio is there. . . . If I could say one thing about all of it, we’re always going to be there. We’re never going to be gone. Radio will be there forever.”

A newspaper group manager had a similar thought about his medium.

I have faith in newspapers. The Internet obviously is out there and there is a trend moving toward that, but I also believe the newspapers will be the ones, especially in community news and smaller communities like what we have, will be driven by the newspapers. We already have the reporters in place, so if people are ready to go in that direction of getting more news online, we’re going to be the ones providing that for them, not bloggers, per se. . . . In the larger markets, your larger metropolitans, I feel that they are going to be facing a much tougher challenge. It will be interesting to see how that plays out in the years to come.

The television owner concurred. “We think the big thing about local television stations, in particular in the smaller markets, is we have a connection, a local connection, that the Googles and the networks don’t have. We think that that connection gives us some advantages that we can exploit going forward no matter what the technologies are.”

Discussion and implications for policy

If localism is viewed as a strength in the new age of multimedia use by audiences, then the rural media markets may be in the best place to thrive. Although they are more fiscally conservative during this economic downturn, they are in a good position to make new media content important to their audiences. Currently the rural markets are the most intensely local and are already strongly entrenched in their communities by offering sports, news, and other information. As information migrates to the Web, they are developing Web content unique to each community, in addition to the interconnectivity and broader benefits of the Internet.

There is still resistance to fully embracing new technology. Rural markets are in the difficult position of facing economic constriction while needing to expand to new media. Using existing personnel to produce content for the Web may put pressures on existing staff members, similar to those felt by other media professionals asked to produce multimedia content. One respondent remarked that this was not the best approach, “but it works for now.”

The interaction with their local communities seems to be the angle that managers are focusing on to make stronger brand connections with their target audiences. Rural media organizations can use social media to make a stronger connection with the public by encouraging user-generated content and local blogging on their sites. This can be assisted with public policies that encourage development of better broadband technologies in rural areas. Mannion and Zougris (2009⁵⁷) suggested that rural communities try to get higher income-generating businesses to come. Part of the way to do that is to ensure that there are strong media organizations in the area to show the area’s potential and vitality. Luther (2007⁵⁸) suggested that communities help sustain themselves and rural media organizations can be a part of that through encouragement of economic development and thriving democracy.

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Author Information

Cindy J. Price ([back to top](#))

Cindy Price is an associate professor in the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of Wyoming. Her research interests include media management and economics, and public relations. She is the recent past chair of the Media Management and Economics Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.



Michael R. Brown ([back to top](#))

Michael Brown is a professor in the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of Wyoming. His research interests include radio in American culture and visual communication history, and he is editor of the Journal of Radio and Audio Media.

