



## Chasing the Community Newspaper Rainbow: *The Whiteville News Reporter* and the Digital Age Epilogue

On the evening of July 1, 2014, dozens of Columbus County residents—many of them teenagers and young adults—gathered on the streets of Whiteville, North Carolina, for a scavenger hunt promoted through social media to celebrate the launch of “POP” (Popular Culture, Opinion and People), a new community on *whiteville.com* that featured “news for people who aren’t old.” The initial edition of the online-only publication carried a handful of blogs and photo essays created by *Whiteville News Reporter* summer interns and focused on such diverse topics as fracking, the US Open and the possibility of virtual reality video games. The regional hospital and a local clothing retailer signed on as initial sponsors.

In opting to go with POP, Editor Les High and his sister, Director of Special Projects Stuart High, deferred until 2015 the launch of “Plugged-In Parenting,” another potential special interest section, despite the fact that “Parenting” was further along in development and had more immediate revenue potential. “We are constantly balancing our long-term aspirations with our current abilities,” explains Les. “You have to be opportunistic, as well as strategic.”<sup>1</sup> POP was “a fun project with a lot of energy behind it, and given the enthusiasm and commitment of the interns, it was relatively easy” (as well as inexpensive) to launch, he says. When the interns returned to college in the fall, he could choose either to let the section lapse or, if it gained traction, he might add a print component—a weekly POP page in the *News Reporter*—and recruit a group of high school students to “keep it going.”

Both Stuarts believed it imperative to position the *News Reporter* as a relevant source of information for the younger generation. POP also offered an opportunity to begin training another generation of Thompson-High family members to assume ownership and management of the *News*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes come from a series of interviews conducted by the author with Les and Stuart High during May and June 2014.

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*Reporter*. L. High's daughter Margaret, though only in high school, was working side-by-side with the interns and her Aunt Stuart on the launch of the first online-only section the newspaper had ever produced. The online-only venture, believes L. High, demonstrated that the newsroom and advertising staffs were able to think "digital first," instead of print first.

Meanwhile, as the rest of the *News Reporter's* small staff of 15 focused on launching POP, S. and L. High laid the groundwork for the other two prongs of their strategy: 1) shed legacy costs by revamping the printing and distribution operation, and 2) pursue new revenue by setting up an in-house digital ad agency to serve the marketing needs of local merchants. By late June, Les had a handshake agreement to outsource the printing operation if necessary to another newspaper publisher 60 miles away. Though his father still hesitated to outsource, L. High was confident that he could respond quickly if a major press component needed repair, the paper lost a printing contract, or one of the pressmen retired.

As evidenced by the success of both "Sports of All Sorts" and 954, the advertising department had made strides in adapting to a changed sales environment. But the Highs no longer felt that simply launching more products would solve the problem. Rather, they felt the entire sales process needed to be revamped, including rates and incentive programs, while ad reps needed to develop a new repertoire of digital marketing skills. "We need to be able to move beyond pricing the advertising based on what we believe the advertiser is willing to pay and instead be able to show the advertisers the value they are getting and why the rate is justified," said Stuart High.

So in June 2014, they agreed to participate in a year-long University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill pilot project to evaluate the feasibility of establishing in-house digital ad agencies at very small community papers such as the *News Reporter*. "We have a lot of small businesses that want to get their name known, and right now they're only reaching their friends," says L. High.

Given our longstanding credibility in the market, I believe our advertising department can learn the skills needed to help [advertisers] touch more people. And if we don't do it, someone else, like an agency from Wilmington, will come into the market and do it.

An added benefit, observes S. High, is that by learning to "speak the language," the *News Reporter* advertising staff would be better equipped to present a compelling argument to regional and national retailers that had already shifted a major portion of marketing dollars into digital initiatives. The *News Reporter* "is still learning as it is going," she says. "The important thing is to experiment and to know how you are going to evaluate success for each project so you can fail quickly and move on, or build on your successes."